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by Dwight V. Swain



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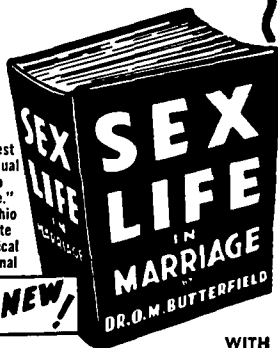
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The Editorial

STRANGELY enough, after eight years of national (and international) publication, we're introducing *Madge* to many new readers this month. No, we're not announcing a new foreign edition. The new readers are strictly domestic, good old USA.

REASON being that we've just switched our national distribution setup. Ever since *Madge's* inception we've been handled by The American News Company. Effective with this issue you'll note the new distributor by the initials on our front cover—PDC, one of this country's large independent national distributors.

SO why the many new readers? It's quite simple. ANC owned its own chain of wholesale branches throughout the country, numbering some 300 cities. Through independent channels of distribution we are now reaching several hundred additional areas where the magazine has never been on sale. To you science fiction readers in these areas, we say, welcome to MADGE! You are not reading a new magazine. This is our eighth year of publication, and *Imagination* has consistently been a leader in the field ever since its inception. Also by way of introduction, we'd like you to become a reader of our companion science fiction magazine,

Imaginative Tales, which will hit the newsstands in your area next month. *Tales* follows the same editorial policy as *Madge*.

WHAT'S our policy? Entertainment. Just as simple as that. We like good action science fiction, stories with a sense of wonder, taking you on far-flung adventures through the Universe. We don't strive to educate our readers—science fiction readers are above average in that department anyway! Instead we present good stories stressing adventure into the unknown. We want you to enjoy science fiction, and in *Madge* and *Tales* you will do just that.

WE'D only like to add, by way of our introduction to you new readers, that both IMAGINATION and IMAGINATIVE TALES are strong on reader participation. Besides our letter departments, we feature a fan column in *Madge*, FANDORA'S BOX, and THE COSMIC PEN CLUB. You'll find the PEN CLUB in IMAGINATIVE TALES too, along with SCIENTIFILM MARQUEE. We also use, as you will note, a fair smattering of cartoons each issue, and they're the best in the business. Add in our striking front covers, our two-color interior illustrations, and — well, we're mighty proud of our books. Hope you will be too wll

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Wherever he turned men hunted him; this was not surprising since he held the key to a secret men would kill for. Yet some believed—

YOU CAN'T BUY ETERNITY!

by

Dwight V. Swain

CHAPTER I HUNT THE MAN DOWN!

THE CARRIER CAME FIRST—a flimsy two-passenger craft, unsuited for

even the shortest of interplanetary jumps.

Swooping down too fast out of the eternal dust-clouds that shrouded the Venusian sky; it crested a hillock by such a narrow margin

as to spray sand high into the never - ending wind, then veered right in a crazy arc.

Another hillock. The carrier struck it a glancing blow that churned up new clouds of sand and dust as it skated diagonally down the slope beyond.

Ahead, jutting from the endless waste of powdery grit that stretched as far as eye could see, loomed low outcroppings of fantastically-eroded rock.

The carrier plowed into them with a rending crash. Claw - like crags gouged at the craft's thin metal skin. A hiss of escaping air played sudden gusty counterpoint to the whistle of the wind. Linewelds popped. Seams split. Bucking and shuddering, the carrier jolted to a halt.

Before the echoes could even die, then, the cowling-seal flipped loose from its seat. The warped entrance-bubble lifted jerkily, wrenching up an inch or two at a time.

Barely half open, it halted. A man wearing a plastron breather-mask squirmed through the slot and, falling, sprawled prostrate in the shifting sands beside the tiny vessel.

But now a new sound echoed overhead — the heavy vibrance of a spaceship's ramping-drone.

Sobbing for breath, the man beside the carrier moved convulsively, then lurched to his knees. His

chrysolite-green tunic was ripped wide where it had caught on the cowling. A long gash above his left temple stained dun-drab hair scarlet. His nose was bleeding, too, so that the transparent breather-mask bubbled spreading ruby streaks every time he sucked in air.

Now, clutching at the carrier's shattered hull, he dragged himself to his feet, stood swaying there.

Simultaneously, the vibrance overhead echoed louder. A sleek-lined, compact Grade IV short-range cruiser plummeted into view through the dust-clouds and hovered momentarily in ramping position — base down, tail fins parallel to the surface of the ground below.

The face of the man from the carrier contorted behind the breather-mask. Turning sharply, he lurched away from the wrecked craft, wading calf-deep through the powdery Venusian dust towards another, larger outcropping of eroded rock.

But as he did so, the cruiser dropped with swift precision. The balancing fins bit in atop a level dune near where the crippled carrier lay. Gears ground. A hatch spun swiftly outward on its screwlocks.

The man on the ground broke into a stumbling run.

From the cruiser, an amplifier blared harsh male syllables: "Halt, you chitza!" And then: "Pull up, rack you! Freeze! You know you can't get away!"

The runner scrambled over a low ledge, then on again. He gave no sign he'd even heard.

"You want a blast, huh, Thigpen? You want to go back with your legs knotted up like old Pike Mawson's!"

The runner's stride broke. Flinging himself sidewise, he rolled bodily down a short, sandy slope, then came up fast and plunged headlong into the shelter of a grotesquely-shaped rock pillar.

Aboard the cruiser, someone cursed: the amplifier picked up the echo. Voices rose angrily, only to cut off again as sharply as if slashed with a knife.

And now, a new voice. A woman's voice, ragged and not quite steady: "Don't worry, Thigpen. No one's going to hurt you. You've my word for that."

A LITTLE EDDY of dust drifted out from behind the rock-pillar; that was all.

Again, the woman's voice: "This is Veta Hall, Thigpen. You don't know me, but you've probably heard of the man I'm speaking for: Pike Mawson, the adjudicator on Japetus. He wants to make a deal with you."

From the rock pillar, silence only.

"You needn't play coy, Thigpen. Mawson knows all about that 'life catalyst' you helped Tornelescu work out. That's why he sent us for you. He's old and crippled; he needs that catalyst himself, so he can find youth again. He'll give anything for it — anything you name. And he doesn't care how many human guinea pigs you killed developing it, or that you cut old Tornelescu's throat. He'll even help hide you from the FedGov men, if that's worrying you."

The last eddy of dust from behind the rock faded away.

"Please, Thigpen!" the woman begged. "Please surrender! It's suicide if you don't." A pause. "Look: you've heard of Igor Cheng, haven't you? The slaver from the Belt? Well, that's who Mawson sent with me to help bring you in — Cheng and three of his pet Belt killers. Only now that the FedGov's put a price on your head: . . ."

The woman's voice trailed off. Then, after a moment, it rose again, with such violence the amplifier screamed protest.

"Don't you understand, you fool?" she cried hysterically. "If you come in now, Igor's willing to live up to his bargain with Mawson. But if you give him trouble, he'll kill you for the FedGov bounty. Only if he does that, then he'll

have to murder me too, so I can't give him away to Mawson when he claims pushing you off was an accident, or self-defense, or whatever other story he decides on!"

Again, silence, broken only by the whish of blowing sand and the ululations of the wind.

The woman sighed audibly. "All right, Thigpen. Don't say I didn't try to give you a chance." Emptiness, defeat, had replaced the desperation in her voice.

The amplifier clicked off. A moment later a landing ladder ratcheted into view below the cruiser's cylindrical hull. A man with radiation-pocked skin and an ugly, livid scar down his right cheek appeared in the open hatchway and, locking his legs about the ladder's uprights, slid swiftly to the ground. Another man of the same hard-faced cut followed, and then another.

For a moment, the cold-eyed trio paused beneath the ship, adjusting breather-masks and checking short-barreled blasters. Then, spreading out, they moved warily towards the rock pillar behind which their quarry had disappeared.

Still there was no visible move from the man addressed as Thigpen. Swinging wide down the slope in a crouch, the scar-faced member of the searching party circled so as to approach the pillar from the rear.

A moment later his voice rasped through a hand-amp: "Rack the dirty starbo! He isn't here!"

Instantly, the cruiser's speaker clicked on again. "What do you mean, he's not there?" A note of repressed excitement echoed in Veta Hall's words. "He's got to be there, Igor! There's no way he could have broken clear!"

The scar-faced man laughed harshly. "That's right, lover-girl. There's no way. So don't waste energy hoping we'll miss him."

Now the landing party's two other members came abreast the pillar. A second hand-amp cut in: "There's a little cover over this way, Cheng. Maybe our boy snaked on over to the next outcrop."

"How could he? We were watching!"

The third man: "Well, you can't find him, can you?"

And the second again: "If he played it right, he could have made it, Cheng. After all, he had that column between him and us."

"All right, we'll go on to the next rocks, then. And when we find that chitza —!"

The trio spread out once more — wading through swirling sand, clambering over jagged ledges. Chill menace showed in their stance and movements. They held their blasters at the ready.

Then, reaching the maze-like cluster of monoliths that was their

goal, they advanced warily between its towering, weird-etched columns till, one by one, they disappeared from view.

Behind them, sand heaved at the base of the rock pillar that had been their first goal. A figure pushed up out of the drifted grit.

It was the man from the carrier. Shooting quick glances to right and left, he rose cat-like, then paused momentarily while he tapped sand from his breather-mask's filter. He looked better now than he had before his brief respite, and both his nose and the head-gash had stopped bleeding. Close-knit, of medium height, and obviously under thirty, he moved with lithe coordination. Cool intelligence glinted in the grey eyes. His face, though hardly handsome, combined an intriguingly paradoxical mixture of recklessness and control.

Now, as he tapped the filter, light flashed from his wrist. Stopping short, he fumbled off a standard doloid identification bracelet.

But though the picture was his, the name engraved beneath it was *Stewart Ross*, not Thigpen.

For the fraction of a second, the man hesitated, then dropped the bracelet into the sand and scraped it under with his foot.

NEXT, PIVOTING, he struck out in the same general direc-

tion his pursuers had taken, but at such an angle as would let the pillar screen him from the cruiser.

A dozen yards farther on, a low, crumbling ledge crossed his path slaunchwise. Dropping down into its shelter, the man wormed swiftly along it till it played out in a wind-furrowed, trough-like hollow.

The hollow gave him cover to a dune, and the dune hid him till he reached the first spur of the strata that formed the outcrop his pursuers now were searching.

Staying low, out of view, Ross followed the spur till he reached the upthrust columns and ledges themselves. Then, a fist-sized rock in each hand, he rose and moved cautiously on into the maze.

Ahead, scar-faced Cheng came into view around a towering escarpment.

Instantly, Ross drew back. Tight-lipped, cold-eyed, he hefted the two rocks.

Scowling under black, bushy brows as he peered this way and that, blaster at the ready, Cheng shuffled closer . . . closer . . .

Ross drew back a step. Then, through a slot between two great stone slabs, he lobbed one of his rocks high into the air above Cheng's head. Sailing in a swift arc, it struck the face of the escarpment and rattled noisily down the steep slope behind the slaver.

Like lightning, Cheng whirled,

finger already rigid on his weapon's trigger.

It put his back to his stalker. Stepping clear of his sheltering slab, Ross hurled the second rock.

It struck the base of Cheng's skull with a meaty *thunk*. The slaver spilled forward.

Ross came in with a rush. Snatching up his downed foe's fallen blaster, he whipped it round just in time to cover the other two members of the landing party as they waded into view through the thick-drifted sand at the cliff's base.

The pair stopped in their tracks, jaws dropping.

Ross' lips peeled back in the caricature of a grin. He didn't speak.

The two men from the cruiser hesitated, then exchanged quick, raw-nerved glances.

Still not speaking, Ross flicked his blaster's muzzle ever so slightly; triggered a bolt.

Sand spewed in a geyser bare inches from the feet of the man at the left.

Like magic, the pair dropped their weapons.

Ross stripped off his torn, chrysolite-green tunic and tossed it down beside black-browed, scar-faced Cheng, still lying limp and unconscious in the sand. "Put this on him. And give me his outfit."

The slaver's two aides didn't even

argue about it.

The switch finished and a cap donned to hide his gashed scalp, Ross eyed his captives coldly. "How many aboard the cruiser?"

A moment of sullen hesitation. Then: "Just two — the girl, and one of us to keep track of her."

"For your sake, I hope you're not lying." Ross' words held a flat, deadly ring. "Now get this straight: you've finally captured me. But you had to knock me out to do it, so you're carrying me back to the ship." And then, to the nearest of the prisoners: "You! Put that on your hand - amp. Tell the woman about it, strong enough for her to believe it."

Eyes still on Ross' blaster, the man obeyed.

Ross smiled thinly. "Let's go."

Sullenly, his two prisoners heaved up their green-tunicked, still-unconscious chief between them and, shuffling and stumbling, carried him out of the outcrop's rocky maze to the dusty, wind-swept spread of sandy waste beyond. Ross moved with them, but with face averted. He maneuvered, too, to keep the others between him and the cruiser.

Then, at last, they were climbing the dune on which the ship stood ramped. . . angling up the final slope and pausing beneath the shining metal hull, out of view of the open hatchway above.

Ross said, "Lie down, you two!"

"Lie down —?" Panic flared in the eyes of the man nearest him. "So you can blast us, you mean? No —"

He lunged as he spoke. But Ross was already moving, swinging up the blaster's butt in a hard, fast blow to the other's head.

The man dropped. Hastily, his companion stretched out as ordered.

"Stay there," Ross clipped. Then, incredibly cool, he turned to the ladder and, head tilted forward to hide his face, climbed swiftly towards the hatchway.

Above him, Veta Hall spoke, her voice no longer marred by the amplifier's distortion: "You really did get him, Igor? Alive, not dead —?" But her tone told nothing of how she felt about it.

Ross mumbled incoherently, not slowing his climb.

"Will you need a sling to lift him, Igor?"—A male voice, this one.

Another guttural mumble. Ross' chin scraped his chest, he was holding his head so far forward.

A hand touched his shoulder. "Speak up, Igor! I can't understand —"

Ross gripped the sill of the hatchway. His head came up — teeth bared, eyes blazing. In one lunge, he slammed through the open port, bowling Veta Hall aside.

The next instant he ricocheted in-

to a gaping, goggle-eyed rowdy who held a spanner in one hand, a vortane-tube in the other.

The man swung the spanner in a wild arc.

Ross ducked under it. Savagely, he drove an elbow into the other's side, in the soft-fleshed belt between hip and ribs.

Goggle-eyes gave an anguished shallow-breathed gasp. Rising almost on tiptoe, he tottered forward three or four uncertain steps, then slumped in a heap on the floor.

When the woman tried to snatch up the fallen spanner, Ross kicked it out of her hand with such violence that she cowered back against the wall, moaning and clutching her bruised fingers.

Paying her no heed, Ross doubled back to the hatch and spun the control-wheel. The vault-like door sang on its screw-locks. In seconds, all entry was barred.

Bleakly, now, Ross glanced at his new prisoners — first the woman, then the man, then back to the woman again.

"So Pike Mawson wants to make a deal with me, does he?" His curt laugh held no mirth. "All right, I'll let him. Only the terms are going to be mine, not his — and by the time I'm through, Stera help him, he'll wish he'd never heard of me, or the catalyst, or old Tornelescu either!"

CHAPTER II TROUBLE ON JAPETUS

TIME PASSED SLOWLY, hovering there high above tiny Japetus, waiting for Saturn's shadow and a chance to slip in.

Ross yawned and stretched. Then, taking out his writer, he doodled briefly on an astrogation pad.

Only somehow, the doodles all seemed to end up resembling Veta Hall.

Ross sighed and put away the writer. Sinking deeper into his seat, he stretched his legs at full length before him. His shoulders, his head, sagged forward just a fraction. But he still kept the blaster across his lap; and though his lids tended to droop, his grey eyes still followed the woman's every move.

Incongruously, she wore a quilted space-suit liner. But even such failed to hide the youthfulness of her body and her movements. Her dark, curly hair — worn short — only accented the regularity of her features, the unblemished smoothness of her skin, the absence of all lines and wrinkles.

Now, suddenly, she flushed under Ross' scrutiny. Turning away abruptly, she fumbled in her shoulder bag and, after a moment, brought forth a Pallastan vocorn pipe.

Ross' eyes widened. But he said nothing.

Adjusting the pipe's mouthpiece, still ignoring Ross, the girl began to play. Weird minor melodies, developed in the unique contrapuntal manner of the pipe's fourteen-note polyphonic scale, welled and echoed through the cramped space of the cruiser's cabin.

Wincing, Ross held his peace till the girl paused.

"You're from Pallas, Veta?" he asked then, quickly.

Wordless, she shook her head; began to play again.

Another fragmentary pause.

"Somewhere else in the Belt, maybe?" Ross persisted. "Vesta? Ceresta? H'sana?"

Again, silent denial.

Ross frowned. "I didn't know they played vocorn pipes anywhere outside the Belt."

Veta Hall broke off her music for an instant. "They don't," she retorted succinctly, and plunged back into a Chonya dirge.

Ross laughed. "All right, I'll put the question straight, then: where *are* you from?"

"Ganymede. Porforio."

"And the pipe —?"

"I had a Pallastan teacher, an enthusiast. He convinced me that all the inner and outer planets, and the satellites between, were holding their breath waiting for someone to come along and play

a vocorn pipe for them."

"You sound bitter."

"I'm not, though. Not really." For the first time, the girl smiled and fully faced Ross. "You see, I like piping, just for its own sake. And now that it's past, it doesn't matter too much about the other, the disappointment."

"The disappointment —?" Ross encouraged.

"Of finding I couldn't make a career of piping." Veta laughed wryly. "First I tried in Porforio, then Idacta, then even Brenskaala, on Callisto. Only there still weren't enough people who wanted to hear me play, so when my money ran out — I didn't have too much to start with; just what I'd inherited when my father was killed in a thermal — why, when it was gone, I took a job in a traveling show, charming gulfers."

Ross stared. "Charming gulfers —?"

"That's right." Veta laughed. "I don't know what the right name for them is, but they have them on some of the asteroids and they call them engulfers — gulfers for short. They look like worn-out rubber rugs, but if they get the chance they'll wrap themselves round you and digest you alive with their juices."

"Go on."

Veta shivered. "They're awfully dangerous, really. They kill lots

of people in the Belt. But they happen to like vocorn music too; they'll even move in rhythm to it. So in this show, I played my pipe to charm them."

"It sounds fascinating," Ross observed dryly.

"Believe me, it wasn't." The girl shivered again. "But it was the best I could do till I met Mr. Mawson."

"How did that happen?"

"The show went broke on Japetus. As adjudicator, Mr. Mawson checked on it. He liked me, and the next thing I knew, he was giving me little jobs to do. Then they got bigger, till finally he even sent me along on this trip with Cheng to pick you up."

"I see," Ross nodded slowly. "He trusts you a lot, apparently."

"Yes, of course." Veta nodded also. But a nervousness suddenly seemed to have seized her. Shifting, she fingered her pipe, eyes dodging Ross'.

For an instant he studied her; then rose, crossed the cabin, and once more checked the visiscreen. "It won't be too long now. We're beginning to move into shadow."

Veta's head came up. "And then — you're going down there, to Japetus, and. . . try to do something to Mr. Mawson —?"

"I'm going down, anyhow."

"But why?" Now Veta, too, rose from her seat. Half-hesitantly, she

came to him. "Wouldn't it maybe be better if you just — well, forgot about it?"

ROSS' FACE DARKENED. "That kind of thing takes a lot of forgetting. When somebody forces my carrier off course, so that I crash on Venus, and then tries to blast me —" He broke off, thin-lipped.

"But still —"

Ross turned on the girl. "What do you care about it, whether I do or whether I don't? Are you afraid Mawson might get hurt?"

His companion's face flamed. She started to turn away.

But before she could move, Ross caught her by the shoulders. His fingers gouged into the soft flesh. "Don't try that! I'm not in the mood for it, and I've heard better stories than the one you've been telling. To listen to you talk, you're not even too bright.

"Only I don't believe that — not for a minute, because Pike Mawson's not the kind of man to send a giggling girl out to take care of his business. So throw out the act: you've got brains and judgment; admit it!"

The color drained from the girl's face as Ross spoke. Twisting, she cringed from his fingers.

He shook her. "Tell me the truth, rack you! Why did Mawson send you out here with Cheng?

What makes him so sure he can trust you?"

No answer.

Savagely, Ross flung the girl into a seat and turned his back on her. "You're a fool!" he lashed bitterly. "A fool, and a liar, and the kind of trollop who'll run a murderer's errands!"

"Shut up!" This from Veta. Eyes flashing, she jumped from the chair, caught Ross by the elbow, and whirled him. Her hand whipped up and in, slapping — once, twice, three times. . . .

Ross reeled back, clutching for her wrists. "Stop it!" he roared.

"Why should I?" Veta tore free and twice more dealt stinging slaps before he could pinion her arms. "You call me names — you, Lewis Thigpen, the man who helped Tornelescu murder all those hundreds of innocent people, testing that catalyst!" She was panting and sobbing at once. Tears streaked her cheeks.

Ross said tightly, "I'm sorry I lost my temper. I apologize. But when you wouldn't tell me why you were trying to keep me off Japetus — when you wouldn't even answer my questions —"

"When I wouldn't tell you—?" The girl's tears streamed faster. "How do you want me to say it? Like this?"

Once again, she tore free — and then, flinging her arms about Ross'

neck, buried her streaked face against his shoulder.

For an instant he stiffened. A tremor ran through him. Drawing the girl even closer, he held her to him.

Her voice came muffled: "Don't you see? If you go down, they'll kill you! You're all alone. You won't have a chance."

"That may be," Ross agreed quietly. "Or then again, it may not." A pause. "Have you ever heard of a man named Zoltan Prenzz?"

"Prenzz —?" Veta lifted her face. "No, I haven't. Who is he?"

Ross smiled faintly. "Just a name; a man I knew once." Gently, he tilted Veta's head back and kissed her. "First installment. You'll get the second after we land."

He stepped back as he spoke and, turning, began checking instruments.

"Then — you're going down?" Veta's voice sounded very tired.

"Yes."

"To see this man you mentioned — Zoltan Prenzz?"

"Yes."

Wordless, the girl moved to a position in front of a second panel. With cool efficiency, she adjusted dials; threw switches.

A hush fell over the cabin. The floor rocked slightly as gyroscopes compensated for gravitational im-

balance.

Then, abruptly, there was the slight jar of an almost-perfect ramping: Spinning open an inspection hatch, Ross peered out.

Black night; nothing more.

Ross said, "The calculations must have come out on the target. Let's go."

He spun open the screw-locks; ratcheted down the ladder.

More night. Silently, Ross slid to the ground.

Another moment, and Veta was beside him. Ross turned.

Simultaneously, light pinned him tight against the ladder. A smooth voice said, "My dear sir! Surely you wouldn't deny us the privilege of giving you a proper welcome!"

Ross could only blink and squint against the glare.

The voice from the darkness kept on talking: "You understand, of course, that Japetus has few visitors. At best, it's small and isolated. So, as adjudicator, I take it as my duty to show our little world's appreciation. . ."

Talk and more talk, mellow and meaningless.

Yet somehow, now, a strange note of uncertainty had crept into the speaker's voice. It was as if, suddenly, an initial planned strategy had been shattered, with the result that for the moment he must feel his way and play by ear.

Then, abruptly, that too changed.

"You men there!" the speaker cried, "where are your manners? Get those lights out of the gentleman's eyes! Or at least spread them so we all can see each other."

Instantly, the beam that pinned Ross broadened. With a faint *whish*, a grav-seat dropped from the night to a landing close beside him. Flipping a switch, its occupant held out a hand. "I'm Pike Mawson, sir. Adjudicator for this satellite. Forgive me for not rising, but a blaster-bolt some years ago made that a painful and rather involved process for me."

Ross ignored the extended hand. "I'm Lewis Thigpen."

"Thigpen!" Pike Mawson appeared almost to choke on the name. "No wonder you're glaring holes in me! I only hope you can find it in your heart to forgive an old man's folly!"

ROSS' JAW SAGGED: He stared helplessly at the pale cripple in the grav-seat.

Mawson said, "This is a long story, Mr. Thigpen, and it does me a deal of discredit. But under the circumstances I have no choice but to tell it." A pause, while he shifted position in the flying chair. "You see, I've already heard from Cheng via your carrier comset, even though I didn't ex-

pect you to land here quite this soon. He's told me what happened, there on Venus."

Ross said nothing.

"Believe me, Mr. Thigpen, piracy was the last thing in my mind when I sent Cheng out to try to find you. But some over-direct individuals misconstrue orders to their own tastes ever so easily."

"Apparently." Ross bit the word off.

But here, it seemed, all sarcasm was wasted. The adjudicator went on as if no word had been spoken:

"The root fault's mine, Mr. Thigpen. I acknowledge it freely. When I heard of Doctor Tornelescu's life catalyst, and that there was a chance you knew its secret, my sense of values went out of balance. I could think of nothing but the possibility that my own brief remaining span could be prolonged. The fact that you faced—certain difficulties — as a result of Tornelescu's untimely death; the detail that you had no desire to come here — I pushed all such to the back of my mind. All I could think of was the one burgeoning reality that Tornelescu had finally isolated the chemical that controlled human aging; and that when this chemical was injected into an older person, it combined with the amino acids of the body to turn back the clock and give a man new youth.

"It was a foolish thing for me to send for you, Mr. Thigpen. I realized that almost as soon as Cheng's ship was out of sight. But by then, it was too late to try to stop him, so all I have left to fall back on now are apologies."

"Apologies?" Ross clipped. "It seems to me there's a small matter of damages, also."

"Of course, Mr. Thigpen!" Mawson was almost too eager. "Would fifty thousand satisfy you?"

"Fifty thousand —!"

"It's done, then. That is, if you have a writer you can lend me."

Wordless, Ross handed the adjudicator the slim tube; received it back again with a signed form.

"Now we'll take you on into the city and find you quarters," Mawson chortled. "Come. There's a transor over on the edge of the ramping area."

A woman's voice from the outer darkness said, "Surely you'll not let him go before you introduce us, Pike." Her tone was syrupy, with shadings of coy reproach.

"No, of course not." Mawson's pale face grew unhappy. "Mr. Thigpen, allow me to present the most famous woman of our time: the one and only Astrell."

Already the woman was coming from the shadows, an auburn-haired vision of utter loveliness.

Only then the full force of the light struck her, and the illusion

died beneath the bitter onslaught of too many years.

Astell seemed to sense it. Hastily, she drew back into the fringe of friendly shadows. "I won't hold you now, Mr. Thigpen; I know you must be tired. But I promise, I'll see you another time."

"The transor, Mr. Thigpen —" Mawson began.

Ross said, "First, I'd like to speak for a moment to Miss Hall."

"Miss Hall? Miss Hall —?"

"The girl you sent with Cheng."

"Oh. Veta." The adjudicator's face grew even more unhappy. But he raised his voice: "Sanford! Sanford, where are you?"

A shadow detached itself from the others. . . a tall, gaunt shadow, this time. "Here, Pike."

"Where's your sister, Sanford? Mr. Thigpen wants to see her."

"My sister? Veta?" Sanford Hall sounded vague about it. "How would I know, Pike? I guess she must have slipped away."

Without another word, he turned to go. But as he did so, the blazing lights focussed on the cruiser fell full into his eyes.

Ross breathed in sharply: the glaze, the distortion of iris and of pupil — they could belong to no one save a starak addict in the last stages of his vice.

"The transor, Mr. Thigpen —"

Ross said, "Thanks, Adjudicator. This takes care of me nicely."

I'll find my own quarters."

Without waiting for response, he pressed the first button that came beneath his finger on the selector.

The transor surged forward. Leaning back, Ross checked his pocket for the form Mawson had given him.

Two pieces of paper rattled in his fingers. Frowning, he drew them out.

The first was Mawson's form.

The second, a note-sheet, bore only a name and address: *Veta Hall, 417D Esrach Unit.*

Ross' frown furrowed deeper. Refolding both papers, he thrust them back into his tunic.

IT TOOK HIM AN HOUR to find satisfactory two-room quarters.

The deciding factor in his choice, it finally turned out, was that one place offered bars on the bedroom window.

Then that was done. Once again, Ross moved out into the streets . . . checked a com-call reel in the nearest store.

Zoltan Prenzz' address was less than ten minutes' walk away.

Two doors from Prenzz' number, Ross paused in the shadows. Warily, he searched the street.

Now a man appeared, moving too casually down the other side.

Ross watched him till he was out of sight. Then, pivoting, he

proceeded to Prenzz' address.

No light showed. After a moment's hesitation, Ross knocked.

No response.

Ross rapped again, more sharply.

Still no answer.

Another moment's hesitation.

Then, quickly, Ross slid a paper-thin variable tab into the lock-slot.

There was a click of contacts made and contacts broken. Noiselessly, the door swung back.

Swiftly, Ross stepped to one side and stood there, poised and waiting.

Nothing.

Or almost nothing.

Ross sniffed. His forehead furrowed. He stepped across the threshold; sniffed again.

Two more steps, and his foot struck something in the darkness. Stiff-fingered, he drew out his flamer; flicked it.

Its light fell full on the face of Zoltan Prenzz.

CHAPTER III SQUEEZE PLAY

PRENZZ WAS VERY DEAD.

That was self-evident, without examination. No stench such as permeated this room ever could have come from living tissue.

The odor grew worse by the moment. While Ross stared, his face a mask of numb, horrified dis-

belief, the corpse took on a strangely oozy look. Inside its clothes, the body began to lose its contours. Flesh sloughed from one cheek, then the other, as if putrefaction were somehow here motivated to race to destroy the evidence of crime.

Shuddering, Ross flicked his light off, stumbled back to the door, and retched. He was still shaking his head as if to clear his nostrils of the cramped room's stench as he plunged into the shadows of the nearest alley.

For a moment, there, he paused and stood frowning. Then, narrow-eyed, he fumbled through his tunic's pocket and came out with a now-familiar note-sheet. . . unfolded it. . . stared down at the name and address it bore: *Veta Hall, 417D Esrach Unit.*

Folding the note-sheet again, Ross strode on through the alley to the next street, climbed into the first vacant transor, and punched the Esrach Unit button on the selector panel.

The transor surged forward, gears whining as it picked up speed. Three minutes and a bewildering series of turns later, it ground to a halt once more, automatic door already lifting.

Ross got out. But instead of going on into the unit, he left-faced, walked briskly down the street to the first corner, turned

right, and so continued until, after another right turn, he stood directly behind the Esrach building.

In front, the structure had made some show of keeping up appearances, for all its obvious age and deterioration. The entrance was neat if not new, and imitation vel-drene drapes and occasional lengths of doloid stripping had been added to put a bold front to drabness.

Back here, in the rear, all such was recognized as sham. Thick grime and even streaks of rust took the place of decoration. Litter cluttered the base-line, and the nearest door sagged half-open on its hinges.

Inside, old odors of grease and filth added to the air of decay.

There was a stairway of sorts beside an ancient fire-tube. Climbing to the fourth level, Ross moved silently down the dank central corridor.

Veta Hall's number, 417D, was located close to the middle of the first wing. Instead of a tab-lock, the door had a primitive chain affair, anchored on the inside.

Getting out his writer, Ross maneuvered for a moment. The chain clinked, then fell away.

Easing the door open the rest of the way, Ross stepped inside.

Small noises drifted from a room beyond the one in which he stood. Crossing to it, he reached for the

doorknob.

Before he could touch it, the door whipped open. Veta crossed the threshold, her eyes not even focussing on him.

Ross caught her wrists as she looked up. When she started to cry out, he twisted sharply, so that the sound died on an indrawn breath.

Now she stared at him, face pain-strained. "Thigpen, what's the matter —?" It was the faintest of whispers.

"Nothing. Nothing but a corpse, that's all." Ross said it through clenched teeth. "Not that you'd know anything about that, would you, Veta? — About a man they called Zoltan Prenzz, the man I told you I was going to see on Jape-tus first chance I got —"

He broke off; twisted the girl's wrists again.

It brought her forward on tip-toe, tiny anguished sounds bubbling in her throat.

Ross' face stayed a cold, relentless mask. He said tightly, "It's my own fault, Veta. All mine, for trusting you even a little. — you, working for Pike Mawson, and with a brother on starak. Only now you're going to make it up by telling me the things I need to know. And this time there'll be no holding out or stalling."

"Please, Thigpen. . ." The effort of speaking brought a small cluster

of saliva bubbles to one corner of Veta's mouth. "I don't know what you're talking about. There must be some mistake —"

"Your mistake," Ross corrected harshly. He backed Veta into the room from which she'd come. "We'll have some answers now: who killed Zoltan Prenzz?"

"I don't know!"

"Who'd you tell about him?"

"I didn't —"

"Who, I said! Mawson? Your brother?"

"Thigpen, I didn't tell anyone! I couldn't! You only mentioned the man once. I didn't even remember his name till just now, when you reminded me."

"We'll try it again, then —"

A knock sounded on the outer door.

Veta opened her mouth to scream.

LIKE LIGHTNING, Ross hammered a blow to her jaw, then caught her limp body before she could spill to the floor.

The knock sounded again. A man's voice called, "All right, you, in there! Open up."

Ross' eyes fanned the room, then fixed on the old-fashioned fire-tube hatch set into the wall in one corner. Dragging Veta across to it bodily, he wrenched it open, stuffed her in, and let her drop, then hastily followed suit himself

as the voice in the hall rose even more belligerently.

The tube discharged them into a narrow, litter-choked court between the building's wings. Veta slung over his shoulder like a sack of meal, Ross ducked into the nearest entryway.

The niche sheltered the doors to two apartments. The sound of a man and woman arguing violently pulsed from one; from the other, silence.

Now a shout rose on one of the building's upper levels: a man's angry bellow, echoing and reechoing as it bounced back and forth across the narrow court. Veta moaned and moved her head groggily.

A trickle of sweat rilled from Ross' hairline. Stepping close to the door of the silent apartment, he tried the knob.

The door was locked.

Overhead, another shout. Then, from the court's ground level, a harsh rattle of answer.

Ross stepped back fast, eyes distending. Lifting a foot, he smashed a battering-ram kick at the door's lock.

The door burst open. Dodging past it as it swung back, Ross heeled it shut behind him. He was breathing hard, and another rill of sweat had joined the first.

Prowling through the empty apartment now, Veta still slung

limp over his shoulder, Ross jerked back storage area sealers until, after half-a-dozen tries, he came upon and dragged out a heavy, shapeless space-sack of the type used by cruiser crewmen.

Another moan from Veta. She shifted, clutching at Ross' tunic.

Unceremoniously, he dumped her on a bed, then returned to the space-sack. Spreading its mouth wide, he lifted the girl's legs and set her feet down inside the bag.

Veta's eyes flicked open, panic-shadowed. "What are you doing?"

"Getting you ready for a little trip." He heaved her up from the bed and lowered her into the sack, pulling the heavy synthetic casing up to cover her. "If you know what's good for you, you'll keep quiet."

He pulled the sealer-tab shut as he spoke, disregarding her sudden frantic flurry of movement. Then, turning, he stepped back to the storage shelves, selected and donned one of several spaceman's leave caps, swung the bag to his shoulder, and boldly strode out of the apartment and the court to the nearest transor-rank.

The trip across the city was uneventful. Hardly a hint of movement showed through the stiffness of the space-sack's heavy casing.

Ross left the transor two streets from his own quarters, walking the rest of the way through two linked

alleys. He was half-panting by the time he reached the entrance; and his fingers shook as he shoved the card into the tab-lock.

Then, at last, he stepped into the dim, silent living room and dumped the space-sack to the floor. Tossing the leave cap into a corner, he swabbed the sweat from his forehead, shoved shut the door and bolted it, and slid a lamp-switch to the first notch.

The room brightened.

A voice came through the silence also: "You frightened me, Thigpen. I was beginning to be afraid you weren't coming."

A woman's voice, low and husky and seductive.

Ross spun round, eyes distending.

Astell reclined on the divan across the room in studied grace. The soft light smoothed her features so that when her lips curved in a slow smile she might have been younger by twenty years.

"Didn't you expect me, Thigpen?" she murmured. "I told you I'd come, you know."

Ross shrugged, not speaking. His face now had taken on a wooden look. Picking up the space-sack, he carried it to the bedroom, closing the door after him as he returned.

Still smiling, Astrell patted the seat beside her with a somewhat pudgy hand "Come sit down, Thigpen."

Ross met her gaze coldly. "I don't think that's necessary, Astrell."

"Oh, but it is!" The woman rose from the couch as she spoke, and came to him. "It's not just the catalyst, my dear. I want to get to know you better."

"Do you?"

"Of course I do!" Astrell traced fluttery designs on the front of Ross' tunic with a long-nailed forefinger. Close up, her knuckles showed deep wrinkles. The skin along the backs of her hands was creping, too, and the flesh along her throat, beneath her eyes, and at the corners of her mouth was sagging visibly.

But still she preened, and fluffed her halo of determinedly auburn hair, and threw Ross the coy, flirtatious, low-lashed glances of a woman two decades younger. "You know, darling, you'll be glad, too."

"Oh?" Ross stood unbending. "Just what is it I'll be glad of?"

"Why, that you helped me, of course." Astrell laughed, just a bit too shrilly. "It's not as if I were asking you to give it to me, you know. I'm more than willing to pay for it, and I've the money, too—more money than you can even dream of, all my savings from those years when no one from here to the Belt even thought of giving a social affair top rating, if Astrell didn't attend."

THE WOMAN SEEMED to grow taller as she spoke. Head high, she moved to and fro with slow, graceful steps — a queen in bearing, however caricatured, living for the moment in her dreams of glory-radiant days gone by.

Then, once more, she paused close to Ross. "Besides, my dear, once I've the catalyst, I'll be young again — and very, very grateful to you." An insinuating laugh. "Darling, have you any idea how delightful it can be to hold the gratitude of a girl whose talents were such that she was able to marry the seven richest men in all the outer planets, one after the other?"

Again, the woman reached out a pudgy hand to caress Ross. His teeth clicked together, as if with a sudden involuntary shiver. Catching the hand in his own, not too gently, he pushed it away.

"There's something you need to understand, Astrell," he said in a tight, controlled voice. "I can't think of anything I'd rather do than milk you of all that money you've piled up. But I haven't got the catalyst, or the formula either. So you're wasting your time, mooning around me."

"Don't worry, Thigpen. I understand." Astrell gave vent to a knowing, conspiratorial giggle. "You've got to be careful. Killing Tornelescu — that was dangerous;

you can't afford to admit it, even to me. The same way with the catalyst: you've no intention of confessing you've so much as heard of it. But if a case of it were to turn up in my rooms, somehow, and a money-case were to vanish—"

Ross said, "Get out."

"'Get out' —?" The woman's head jerked back. She searched his eyes for a long, unsteady moment.

Then a pallor came to her withered cheeks, for all their show of artificial color. Her breathing speeded. "Thigpen, you mean it! The catalyst—you're not going to sell it to me—"

And then, in a rush, face thrust close: "Don't say it, Thigpen! Don't say it if you want to live! I can give you beauty. I can give you money. But if you won't take them, then I'll get the catalyst without you! They'll find you in an alley with your throat cut, Thigpen — the same way you left Tornelescu! And Thigpen — you'll call it a favor when they finish you, because first they'll make you tell the secret —"

The woman's voice rose higher with every sentence, till she was half-screaming. Her face contorted into a wrinkled mask of hate. Her back bent, too, and her body seemed to pull together, till when she shook her fist at Ross she was hag, incarnate; the embodiment of every creaking crone.

"Out!" Ross clipped. "Out!" Grimly, he pressed her back towards the door.

For an instant it seemed she was going to resist, force him to back his commands with violence. Then, abruptly, she whirled and without another word fled the apartment.

Gustily, Ross let out pent-up breath and, pivoting, turned once more to the other room.

But now, on the threshold, he stopped short. For where the space-sack had lain brief minutes before, now there was only crumpled bedding.

Momentarily, Ross stood as if paralyzed. Then, with a curse, he sprang forward - flinging aside furniture; clawing open the storage areas.

No Veta.

Ross whirled to the barred window.

The bars weren't there any more.

Stiff-faced, stumbling, Ross sank down onto the bed.

Only then, seemingly out of nowhere, Cheng spoke to him; Cheng, the smuggler; Cheng, the slaver; Cheng, the black-browed, scar-faced killer from the Belt:

"All right, Thigpen. Listen to me. This is the way we're going to play, and I don't mean to tell you more than once."

Ross came up from his seat as if on springs. Wildly, he looked this way and that.

To no avail. There was no sign of anyone in either room.

"Get this, now, Thigpen. Get it the first time."

Slowly, Ross turned, searching.

The thing lay on a table close at hand — one of those silvery spheres known as memory balls, a tiny, self-contained speaker unit only slightly larger than a marble yet still capable of repeating once any brief statement made in its immediate vicinity.

Cheng's voice again: "A man runs a woman into his place in a space-sack, he likes her some, Thigpen. That's the way I see it."

Ross dug his nails into the table.

"Call her a hostage if you want to, Thigpen. Because she don't come back till I get the formula for that life catalyst stuff you took off old Tornelescu."

Ross' eyes seemed to draw deeper into his skull, his head to sink farther down between his shoulders.

"Of course, if you're the kind of chitza don't give a filan how long it takes the wench to die, that won't mean nothing to you."

Ross stood as if carved in granite.

"Maybe you *do* like her, though." Cheng chuckled maliciously. "Well, then, that makes it simple: you just hang around awhile at a place they call Naraki's. It's down in the old port quarter." A fragmentary pause. "You got

that, Thigpen? You just stick at Naraki's kabat-dive till somebody comes and gets you.

"Otherwise — no more Veta Hall!"

The memory ball clicked off.

CHAPTER IV THE GULFERS

ROSS CARRIED IT clear to Commandant Padora, at Fed-Gov Security headquarters.

At that level, the conversation didn't last long.

"And just what is your mission, Mr. Ross?" The commandant's voice rang chill, even through the com-set.

Ross ran his tongue along dry lips. "To recover Doctor Tornelescu's notes and formulae pertaining to the life catalyst at the earliest possible moment, sir."

"To the best of your knowledge and belief, does Cheng hold those papers?"

"No, sir."

"Does the Hall girl?"

"No, sir."

"Do either of them know what's become of the batch of prepared catalyst allegedly taken from Tornelescu's laboratory?"

"Not so far as I know, sir."

"The situation seems clear enough to me, then." Commandant Padora's tongue bore a scalpel edge. "You hold the rank of special agent in

this organization, Mr. Ross. That entails a certain obligation. Among other things, it means that when you're assigned a mission, you carry it out, without quixotic sidetrips to rescue maidens in distress."

Ross flushed even in the darkness of the com-booth. "Yes, sir."

"To save time for both of us, then, I suggest that from now on you remember you're masquerading under the name and in the garb of Lewis° Thigpen for one purpose only: to decoy Tornelescu's killer out of hiding."

"Yes, sir."

"Then get on with it! That's an order!"

Ross swore beneath his breath as the line went dead. Savagely, he dialed another number.

A brisk male voice: "FedGov Building Seven."

"Get me Pike Mawson's office."

"That's. Department of Litigation, sir. One moment."

A female voice: "Department of Litigation, Adjudicator Mawson's office"

"Let me talk to Mr. Mawson."

More time out. Then: "Adjudicator Mawson speaking."

"Thigpen here."

"Thigpen, Lewis Thigpen?" The adjudicator's voice grew brusque and chill. "I'm afraid you have the wrong party, sir. I don't know anyone named Thigpen."

"Listen, Mawson —"

"Murderers are hardly to my taste, sir. Even if I did know Thigpen, it would be my greatest pleasure to turn him over to Security for immediate prosecution."

Angrily, Ross slammed up the com-set and stalked forth from the booth.

Outside, the street was empty, without even a transor in sight. Turning right, Ross strode grimly towards the nearest avenue. His face was set in bitter, deep-hewn lines, but no hesitation showed in his carriage or his manner. Rather, an air of hard, aggressive recklessness now marked him. Tension was in his stance, his movements — the sort of surging drive that calls for quick release in action.

Only then, of a sudden, close behind him, a power-unit crescendoed from hum to thunder. Wheels screamed as they scraped a curb.

Ross dived sidewise by reflex, not even glancing backward.

Careening, a vanster hurtled across the spot where he'd stood, then rocked back into the street and raced out of sight.

The man in the control-seat was the same one who'd appeared close by Zoltan Prenzz' apartment.

Tight-lipped, Ross picked himself up and brushed the dust from his clothes, then continued warily on to the avenue.

Here there were transors. In seconds, Ross was on his way to the

old port quarter and Naraki's.

The place was a kabat-dive, as Cheng had said; the clientele cold-eyed, hard-faced, seclusive.

Ross started drinking.

Three kabats later, a lounge with the dark, lethal look of Malya blood about him passed Ross' elbow. "Ramp 9-D, Thigpen."

It was deftly done, with unmoving lips. To all outward appearances, the man hadn't even spoken.

THE RAMP HELD a freighter with a space-pocked, time-battered hull that hid a high-capacity neutron drive capable of powering a Grade IX cruiser.

Ross boarded the ship in bleak silence, with questions neither asked nor answered on either side. Pausing at the galley, he gulped food till he could hold no more, then slumped down in a bunk to sleep out the trip in a state of something close to complete exhaustion.

And then, seemingly in seconds or minutes rather than hours, the craft was ramping again, dropping down amid the cliffs and crags and craters of a bleak astroidal landscape.

Still blinking the sleep from his eyes, Ross stumbled through a cargo-shaft, into a vast, cave-concealed shelter.

There were corridors, after that, and shaft-lifts; and, finally, a

long, narrow, cell - like room with a barred door.

The two men who'd guided Ross showed him in; slammed shut the self - locking door behind him.

Grim - faced, Ross turned.

"Thigpen!" Veta Hall ran towards him, out of the shadows at the far end of the room. Gladness rang in her voice; shone from her face. "You came! You came!"

"Did I have a choice?" Ross' smile held little mirth. "I got you into this, Veta; trussed you up in a sack like a pigeon for Cheng to grab. The least I can do is try to get you out."

"Don't worry, Thigpen. You can get her out."

Ignor Cheng speaking, this time. Ross turned sharply.

The scar - faced, black - browed smuggler - slaver - outlaw stood just beyond the barred door, lips peeled back in a death's head grin. His thumbs were hooked in his broad belt, and his expression was that of a man well - satisfied with his world.

Ross' face went wooden.

"You ready to talk?" Cheng prodded.

"Would I be here if I wasn't?"

"Well, where's that formula? Let's see it!" Cheng thrust a hairy hand between the bars.

Ross shrugged. "Did you think I'd be fool enough to bring it with me?"

"Then what —?"

"You'll have to take us to it."

"Where?"

"Venus. That place you crashed me."

Cheng leaned on the bars — brutal face darkening; scar livid. His voice came out a snarl: "Don't try it, you starbo! Don't try it!"

Ross met the slaver's glare coldly. "What shouldn't I try?"

"That yodor Venus business!" Cheng gripped one of the doorbars with thick fingers. "My pickup crew brought in a gorvide detector. We went over every inch of your carrier; that whole section we traveled. And all we came up with was this!"

Reaching into a pocket, he brought out Ross' doloid identification band and tossed it down on the floor of the cell.

Momentarily, Ross' eyes narrowed a fraction; that was all.

"You take that too good, you zanat!" the slaver observed. "You held too tight on it. So maybe you better start off this party by saying who Stewart Ross is, and how you got your picture on his bracelet."

Ross shook his head, a fraction too swiftly. "I've never seen it before."

"Don't waste your breath, starbo!" Cheng leaned on the bars. "I call the turn here, and I say you talk — about Tornelescu's

formula; that band, there; anything at all. You can do it quick, or you can hurt awhile first. Make up your mind."

"In that case —"

"You're still stalling. You came here to stall." The slaver's scar twitched. "You thought you'd send me off on some ban-crazy run, while you sneaked away with the girl. Only it won't work." A fragmentary pause. "Where's that formula?"

"I don't know —"

"I said, it won't work!" Cheng gestured to his men. "Strip the lousy chitza. See if it's in his stuff."

A brief flurry of struggle; then a search — the thorough kind of search that took account of every seam, every stain; coins, flamer, writer, pad.

It netted nothing.

Cheng said, "Good enough, Thigpen. I'm glad you're this stubborn. It gives me a chance to loosen you up."

He turned to his men. "Bring 'em in."

Wordless, Ross pulled on his clothes. A light sheen of sweat glistened on his forehead.

Cheng said to Veta, "This zanat was good on the one end. He got all those people for old Tornelescu — the ones the doc tested the catalyst on. They say he even did the work; too; squirted the stuff

in with an aeroderm. By the reports on the show - screen, he must have killed over two thousand."

Cheng's helpers came back, rolling a wheeled case so broad it completely blocked the barred doorway.

"Like I said," the smuggler smirked, "this boy's good on the one end. Now we'll see how he fits on the other."

He stepped back, out of the way. His men rolled the case up tight to the door, then lifted a sliding hatch at the end.

Slithering sounds came from the case. Then, quickly, a strange, grey - black form slid through the open hatch, between the door's bars, and down onto the floor of the cell.

Veta drew a swift, noisy breath. Her voice cracked. "*Gulfers —!*"

The sweat on Ross' forehead began to bead. A greyness came to the corners of his mouth.

Now a second of the creatures slithered down onto the floor. Then a third, and a fourth.

THERE WAS A HORROR in the creatures' very shapelessness. Flat, sprawling, like six-or-seven-foot patches of dampness, they undulated over the floor in an erratic, wave-like pattern, closer and closer to Ross and the girl.

Tight - lipped, a step at a time,

his arm about Veta, he drew back to the far end of the narrow room.

Fumbling in her shoulder-bag, the girl brought forth her vocorn pipe. Without a word, she began to play a strange, wailing tune.

As if by magic, the gulfers' wave-patterns lost their erratic touches. Now they moved smoothly, in a sort of hideously-rhythmic dance.

Beyond the barred door and the wheeled cage, Cheng laughed harshly. "That's it!" he jeered. "See who lasts longer, the girl or the gulfers! There's plenty of time!"

Veta's face paled. The smooth flow of her music grew ragged.

Instantly, the gulfers once again moved forward.

Ross drew back yet another step; threw the girl a quick look.

Her fingers, her hands, her whole body was shaking. Horror crawled in her eyes—but not for an instant did she lift them from the advancing gulfers, even though she swayed as if on the verge of fainting.

Ross held her close; braced her. But she only shook harder. Her piping had lost all traces of pattern, of rhythm. Far from halting the gulfers, it now seemed to draw them, incite them.

Beyond the barred door, Cheng laughed again in fierce, sadistic triumph.

Ross gripped Veta tighter. "Stop it, girl! Stop the piping!"

She gave no sign that she'd heard him. After a moment, he reached down . . . pulled the pipe from her lips.

Now, for the first time, she tore her eyes from the hideous things on the floor. "No, no! Let me pipe! They'll come — they'll engulf us!"

Ross said gently, "They'll come anyhow. You can't stop them. So now it's time I tried."

"Time — you tried —?"

"Yes. Just as soon as I tell you something."

Some of the blank horror left Veta's eyes. "Tell me —? What?"

Low-voiced, Ross said, "I don't want us to die with you thinking I'm Lewis Thigpen. That bracelet Cheng found was mine. My name's Stewart Ross, and I'm a Security Agent. Actually, Thigpen died of a heart attack before Tornelescu was killed. But whoever murdered Tornelescu doesn't know that. He's geared to go after Thigpen, because the catalyst formulas and notes use a code for ingredients, and Thigpen's the only one who knew it. So we figured a fake Thigpen would draw the killer out of hiding."

He stopped abruptly. "I wanted you to know." And then, staring down at the gulfers as moment by moment they closed in: "Here. Give me your pipe."

But Veta's fingers tightened a-

bout it. "No. Not till I've told you something too, Stewart. You see, I had to help Mawson. It was the only way I could keep my brother Sanford out of Venus Barracks. But I didn't dare tell you. Mawson — he could have had Tornelescu murdered. And he sent Cheng after you, too, thinking you were Thigpen. Only I think he'd seen Thigpen someplace or other, so when he saw you, he knew you weren't the right man —"

Ross broke in, "I'm sorry, Veta. There's no more time for talk. For real, we either do or die right now."

A gulfer brushed his foot as he spoke. Shuddering, Ross jerked back hard against the room's rear wall, twisting the vocorn pipe from Veta's hand.

Then, like lightning, his arm whipped back, and forward, hurling the instrument the length of the narrow room, straight at the barred door and Igor Cheng.

It was close, a near miss. But Cheng ducked as it hit.

Simultaneously, Ross dived bodily across the encroaching gulfers.

He didn't clear the last, but he was rolling when he landed. Before the creature could get a grip and wrap itself about him, he was on his feet and lunging for the barred door. Arms extended, thrusting between the heavy rods, he threw his whole weight on the

wheeled cage just beyond.

The cage rolled back, away, gaining momentum with every turn of the wheels.

Something brushed Ross' leg. He whirled as a gulfer started to surge up about his ankle.

BENDING DOUBLE, Ross caught the monster by one edge and, with a mighty heave, sent it flapping and slithering between the door's bars, out into the anteroom beyond.

The thing almost hit Cheng. With an oath, the slaver leaped away.

"The cage!" he roared. "Bring back that cage!"

His aides leaped to obey.

Ross snatched up a second gulfer; hurled it after the first.

Cursing and dodging, Cheng's men raced the cage back, striving to block the door.

Kicking through the bars, Ross knocked it out of alignment. Then, grappling with another gulfer, he swung it so it fell on the far side of the closest man.

A hoarse yell. The burly, bullet-headed outlaw leaped back against the bars in his effort to escape contact with the monster.

Fast as a striking wrong, Ross caught the man by the throat with one hand and clawed out his victim's light - pistol with the other.

The first beam he fired scorched the corridor wall less than a

foot from Igor Cheng's head. The second dropped Cheng's other helper in his tracks.

The slaver sprinted away like a scared ban.

Ross' voice crackled. "All right, you! Do you live or die?"

But now, equilibrium recovered, his prisoner only sneered. "Go ahead. Shoot. A fat lot of good it'll do you, locked up there in that room."

Ross' nostrils flared. He dug the pistol deep into the other's broad back.

But Veta caught his arm. "No, Stewart! No! That's not the way!"

And then, to the guard: "Look, Burrage: this is your chance as well as ours."

"My chance—?" The man's eyes rolled as he tried to look far enough round to see her.

"Yes, of course." Veta moved closer. "Did Cheng tell you a batch of Tornelescu's life catalyst was stolen, along with the formulas?"

"It was —?"

"Yes, and it's worth millions—more money than you can even count."

"Where is it?"

"Porforio; on Ganymede."

"Millions, you say — ?" The man called Burrage was almost drooling. "I could get you out of here and down to Ganymede for that."

"Then do it," Veta said. And,

to Ross: "Here, let me have that." She levered the light - pistol from his hand.

"Hurry! Blast the lock!" Burrage grated. "Another minute, and Cheng may be back!"

"Of course," Veta nodded. "It's just that there's one other detail I want clear before we break out. About Stewart, here."

Ross stared. "What —?"

Coolly, Veta leveled the pistol at his belly. "I'm sorry, Stewart," she said, "but you're coming as a prisoner."

"You see, the man who has that batch of catalyst is my brother, Sanford Hall!"

CHAPTER V

SMELL OF DEATH

PORFORIO. Queen city of Ganymede, gem of the outer planets. Bright lights and broad avenues and the graceful architecture of a superior culture, all sealed beneath a gigantic plastic bubble.

Cold - eyed, Ross followed Veta and the man called Burrage as they stepped from the transit belt and approached a low, smooth - lined row of buildings.

Veta said, "The last place is my brother's."

Ross nodded, not speaking, and lengthened his stride.

They reached the entrance. Veta started to step into the warning - beam.

But now Burrage caught her arm. "Oh, no, you don't! We're not about to let him know we're coming!" Then, pulling the girl back, he brought a long, hand-broad, wire - and - plastic tube, a beam - bridge, from beneath his tunic. Deftly, for all his lumbering - ape appearance, he slapped the ends of it over both door - casing outlet tubes at the same instant, so swift and smooth that the umbrian waves' flow was broken by only the faintest of *click - clicks*.

"See? Simple!" Burrage bared stained yellow fangs in an anthropoid grin. "This way, we'll just surprise him." He shoved the door open; gestured. "Stay ahead of me from here on, you two. It's like I say: I really trust you."

Wordless, Ross passed through the doorway, Veta close on his heels.

Sanford Hall's unit was on the second level.

Again, Burrage pushed Ross ahead, then drew his blaster and turned its dial from penetrosion to the impact level. "I'll hit the bolt," he grunted. "The second it shatters, you dive in."

A muffled crash, like that of a gigantic hammer striking. The door burst open. Ross lunged in.

The room was empty.

Now Burrage and Veta joined him. The girl's face was a study

in blank disbelief as she stared this way and that. For his part, Burrage walked in ever - widening circles like a caged animal — head thrust forward, long arms dangling.

Ross' lips twisted wryly. He leaned back against the wall.

Abruptly, Burrage halted; turned on Veta. "All right, where is he?" he slashed savagely. "Me, I risk my neck with Cheng an' the FedGov too to come here — an' now your stinkin' brother's not even here —"

He broke off. His brows drew together a fraction, and he sniffed. "This place stinks, even!" he announced vehemently.

Now Ross, too, was sniffing, straightening. His eyes flicked over the empty room, then fixed on the door of an old - fashioned closet of the pre - sealer period over in one corner.

Crossing to it with quick strides, he jerked the door open.

A stench rolled out into the room. Hastily, Ross shoved the portal almost closed again. "Burrage! Come here!"

The other was beside him in one ape - like bound.

Ungently, Ross shoved him a step to one side. "Get over that way a little. I don't want to open this any farther than I have to." And then. "Ready?"

The other's bullet head bobbed.

"Here goes, then —"

Burrage leaned forward.

Ross jerked the door open once more; swinging it with savage, driving violence. The edge smashed at Burrage's forehead like a poleaxe.

Simultaneously, Ross leaped sideways, kicking for the back of the other's knees.

The kicked leg went out from under Burrage. Before the man could hit the floor, Ross kicked again — to the temple, this time, short and brutal.

Yet still the man caught Ross' foot, . . . held it. . . jerked him down.

Ross kicked with the other foot — a heel-smash to the teeth.

A guttural, animalistic sound burst from Burrage's throat. Letting go Ross' foot, he clawed forward, grappling.

Rolling across him, Ross clutched for the fallen blaster.

In the same instant, Burrage seized Ross by the hips in a bear-hug. The muscles along his back and shoulders writhed as he drew the grip tighter and tighter.

Ross sucked in air in an anguished gasp. Fumbling, he stabbed at his antagonist with the blaster.

But always the quarters were too close, the danger of killing them both too great.

Burrage tightened his grip. A sound of bone scraping bone came dimly.

NOW VETA FLUNG herself into the fray, beating vainly at Burrage's back and shoulders.

She might as well have been a moth on the far side of the room.

Groaning, Ross smashed the blaster down atop Burrage's bullet head.

But the weapon was for shooting, not striking. At the second blow, the light metaloplast alloy shattered.

Veta cried, "Back, Stewart! Roll him back!"

Back bowing, Ross heaved. Together, he and Burrage toppled over.

And now, Burrage's bullet head was close beside the closet door again. Panting and sobbing, Veta swung the portal at the close-cropped skull, slamming it home again and again.

More animal sounds from Burrage. He let go of Ross' hips and, spasmodically, tried to twist away.

Without avail. Ross held him tight.

Another blow from the door-edge. . . then another. . .

Of a sudden, Burrage went limp.

Ross sagged back also, sucking in air in great, lung-deep gulps while Veta cradled his head, sobbing hysterically.

Then, at last, Ross dragged himself up from her lap, and finally from the floor. Unsteadily, he

lurched to the closet door, half-opened it, and once again stared into the space beyond.

Veta started to join him. But he shoved her back. "No. You wouldn't want to."

She stared at him blankly. "I wouldn't want to what?"

"You wouldn't want to see what's in there." Ross shuddered. "Smelling it's bad enough."

The girl turned pale.

For now, the stench in the room was well-nigh unbearable.

A hideous stench. The same appalling odor that had permeated the room in which Zoltan Prenzz died.

Ross said, "Go over by the hall door, Veta. And stay there."

Lips trembling, the girl obeyed.

Stiff-faced, Ross opened the closet, then dropped to one knee and peered this way and that.

The thing inside had been a man once. Now, there remained only an oozing heap of protoplasmic horror.

From the far end of the room, Veta said faintly, "Is — is it Sanford?"

"The clothes are his." Ross answered in a toneless voice. "Beyond that, I doubt that anyone could say."

He straightened; turned to go.

And there it was, written in slime, chest high on the door's inner side. 3/111 and the outline

of a triangle squared.

Standing so he blocked the closet, Ross swung the door all the way back against the wall. "Veta!"

"Yes, Stewart —?" Quickly, she came to him.

He pointed to the symbols on the door. "Do these mean anything to you?"

"Three one-hundred-elevenths of a triangle squared —?" Brow furrowed, she stared at the inscription for a long moment. "No, I'm afraid it doesn't."

"It does to me," Ross said.

Veta's head came round. "It does —? What?"

"It means we're getting closer." Ross smiled thinly. "And just in case you wonder what we're getting closer to, the answer is; closer and closer to Tornelescu's life catalyst, closer to the formula... maybe even closer to Adjudicator Pike Mawson."

Veta's eyes suddenly were shadowed. She looked away and bit her lip.

Ross said, "You don't seem very happy."

"Stewart — Please, Stewart. . ." Veta broke off, lips aquiver. And then, in a shaky, uneven voice: "Can't we forget about them, Stewart — all of them — the catalyst, the formula, Mawson?"

"Oh?"

"Don't you understand? There's death in that catalyst, Stewart —

death in it, and everything about it. It's cursed. Anyone who even comes close to it goes. —Like Sanford —"

"I know," Ross said. But the words held no sympathy, no understanding. "Now that your brother's dead, the catalyst's cursed. We should forget about it."

Veta's face came up. She stared at Ross. "Stewart, please —"

Ross kept on as if she hadn't spoken. "The only question is," he clipped, "will some other people forget about it just as easily?"

"Other people —?"

"Yes. People like Commandant Padora of Security, for instance; he's hunting for me; you know. And Cheng — when do you suppose he'll quit? Mawson, too. That man who followed me on Japetus. Astrell. All the others who've got a finger in this pie —" Ross broke off; laughed harshly. "I don't think quitting's going to be as easy as you think, Veta; not by half-a-million light-years."

"But we could run for it, Stewart!" Of a sudden Veta's words came quick and eager. "Even Security doesn't reach everywhere, nor Cheng either. The satellites off the beaten track — even an asteroid with an out-size orbit like Hidalgo's — we could go there. It might be years before they found us, if they ever did."

"True enough," Ross nodded.

There was a faint edge of contempt in his voice. "Only I'm not going."

THE LIGHT in Veta's eyes died. She stared at him in numb silence.

Ross said, "Your brother's dead, Veta. That seems to be all you care about."

"The trouble with me, though, is that I keep thinking about all the other brothers, and the mothers and fathers and sisters and wives and husbands and children too — all the people in this solar system who don't want to die, but who will, just so long as Tornelescu's life catalyst formula stays in the wrong hands."

"Stewart —"

"Whoever's got that catalyst isn't thinking about life, Veta, or people either. He's thinking about power, the same way Cheng and Burrage think about it. He knows that as long as people love life, that catalyst formula can buy the universe for him."

"That's why I'm not going to run, Veta. And that's why I'm going to finish this job, bring in that formula, even if it turns out you're the one who stole it and I have to cut your throat in order to make recovery."

A visible tremor ran through Veta Hall. Stumbling, face averted, she cowered against Ross. "Stewart. . ." she whispered. "Please,

Stewart, forgive me. Let me go with you. That's all I ask —" And then: "Hold me, Stewart. Just hold me."

Slowly, Ross brought his arms about her. His face was lined, his eyes somber.

After a moment, he said, "We've got to go, Veta. Now. Every minute's precious."

Instantly, the girl straightened. "Of course, Stewart." A smile, tremulous and uncertain. "Where —where are we going —?"

"We'll find out in a minute." Ross stepped over to the wall com-set and dialed a number. A moment later he said, "Mr. Lindgren, please." And then, after another pause: "Peter?—This is Stewart."

A longer pause, replete with sputtering sounds. When the sounds had died, Ross said, "I know I'm wanted, Peter. That's why I'm calling on you: I need help, badly. Otherwise I may not be able to wind up this business, get back that formula. And without the formula I'm in for a sure short-court."

More sputtering. More waiting.

Finally Ross said, "Either you want to help me or you don't, Peter. What I need is any information you can give me on an address: number III of side three, Triangle Square, Calor City, Mars."

Silence Echoing eternities of silence.

At last Veta Hall whispered, "What makes you think those symbols represent that address?"

"Tornelescu's laboratory was located at number 121, side two. I found that out at the briefing when I took on this assignment."

"Oh."

The com-set again, but with swift, clipped words instead of sputtering.

A thin smile came to Ross' lips. "Thanks, Peter." He flipped off the switch.

Veta's eyes locked with his, her face a wordless question.

Ross' smile grew. A grim smile, without mirth.

"Come on," he rapped. "We're back in business." And then, as he steered the girl towards the door: "Number III's a warehouse owned by the Japetan Trading Coadunate, and Adjudicator Pike Mawson is the coadunate's director!"

CHAPTER VI ASTRELL

THE WAREHOUSE at III(3) Triangle Square was sealed up tighter than any tomb. The only windows were those in front, flanking the heavy turn-plate door that opened on the street side.

Narrow-eyed, Ross drew Veta back into a patch of shadow, while overhead Phobos raced Deimos across the sky, the two tiny moons.

like bright coins against the black backdrop of the Martian night.

For the third time, Veta said, "Stewart, it's impossible. There's simply no way to get in. And even if you found one, what good would it do? No one's there. The place is dark as the Coalsack."

"Maybe." Ross' jaw took on a stubborn set. "Then again, maybe not. But one thing's certain: I didn't lay myself open to charges of everything from grand theft to piracy in forcing that cruiser to set us down here just in order to give up now, without even checking."

Turning, he scanned the deserted square for a moment, then, walked briskly across to the warehouse again, following its left wall until — a good hundred yards farther on — he reached the rear end.

Breathing hard, Veta came up beside him. "Stewart, where are you going?"

Not answering, Ross sidestepped the friendly sniffing of a six-legged Martian bak and strode to a box that protruded from the warehouse wall, opened it, and flicked his flamer. Light flared, illumining a neat row of dials.

"What —?" Veta began again.

"Power drain," Ross explained succinctly. "If equipment's running in there, we'll see it on these meters." A pause, while he

checked dial after dial. Then sudden excitement sprang into his voice: "I was right, see? Something's going!"

Dubiously, Veta eyed the indicator. "Maybe it's an air-wash. Or a heater."

"Those take more power. This is a light or two; a show-screen, maybe." Ross snapped shut the cover of the flamer. "No, Veta. Somebody's in there. So now we'll smoke 'em out!"

Pivoting as he spoke, he stepped to the bak and picked it up, then paused briefly while he manipulated the ugly, six-legged creature's ventral plates.

The bak gave a sigh of vast pleasure and settled deeper into the haven of Ross' arms.

Veta stared. "Stewart Ross, have you lost your mind completely?"

"Probably." Ross chuckled. "Hand me that rock, will you?"

The girl's expression showed her reaction plainly. But, following Ross' gesture, she obeyed.

"Thanks." Ross hefted the boulder thoughtfully. "For the rest of it, all you have to do is stay here."

"Stay here —?"

"Till I get back."

Veta's head came up. Her lips firmed. "And why should I do that?"

"Because I'm asking you to." Ross came closer; slipped his free arm about her waist. "If you want

me to, I can even put logic behind it: even though you probably wonder why, I — well, I wouldn't say I hate you. I'd like you to live long enough to give me a chance to prove it.

"On the other side of it, I'm not sure I can trust you. You held out on me about your brother, and his stealing the catalyst. Then, when I found his body, you hardly shed a tear. Maybe that was nervous exhaustion. Or relief that finally, for good, he was off starak. Or, maybe, you just hated me so much there wasn't any room left for tears.

"Anyhow, — regardless of the angle, I want you here, not with me."

Veta's shoulders began to shake, harder and harder. Tears welled and overflowed her eyes; coursed down her face. She brought up a hand and bit at it, as if only thus she could hold back her fury!"

"Rack you, Stewart Ross!" she choked. "Rack you! Rack you for a chitza —"

Again, the shaking. The bak under Ross' arm stuck out its thick, prickly tongue to catch the falling tears.

Ross said, "Now you won't feel so bad if I don't come back. And just to make sure you stay here and obey orders —"

He stepped back quickly. The hand that had been about Veta's

waist knotted into a club-fist. For the second time in the brief hours that he'd known her, he brought up a short, hard blow that snapped the girl's head back.

Then, catching her before she could fall, — he brushed her lips gently with his own and laid her gently in the shadows along the base of the next building.

That done, Ross straightened. Almost casually, he strolled to the front of the warehouse, tugging at the bak's ventral plates as he walked, so that the creature gave out a steady stream of contented sighs and hisses.

Ahead, Triangle Square spread out before Ross. With seeming unconcern, he glanced right and left.

Still no one in sight.

SHIFTING THE ROCK Veta had picked up for him to his right hand, Ross paused long enough to work the bak into a comfortable position.

With cool deliberation, then, he stepped back and hurled the rock with full force at the nearest of the two warehouse windows.

A crash. The window shattered.

Ducking close, Ross kicked away the shards along the sill. A quick, wary step, and he was over it and inside the warehouse office. . . fading back into the nearest corner.

Somewhere close at hand, a latch clicked. A black oblong opened in

the wall across the room.

Ross went down on his haunches. Deftly, he slid the bak out away from him, along the floor.

Six-plate-rimmed feet made small, slithering sounds as the creature darted through the darkness.

Like lightning, over by the black oblong, a paragon whished faintly as the purple beam leaped from its muzzle.

Swift, silent, Ross crept along the wall in a flanking movement.

Simultaneously, off to one side, the bak ran wide in sudden panic.

Again, the paragon spoke.

But the marksman was shooting at his visualization of a man, not an underslung, six-legged, alley bak. As before, the shot went far high.

This time, though, Ross was closer. Coming up fast to full height, he leaped in, grappling for the weapon. The edge of his right hand came down on the other's gun-wrist with smashing force.

The blow tore a choked cry from his opponent's throat. The paragon clattered to the floor.

Before Ross could leap in, the other whirled and fled. Snatching up the paragon, Ross followed.

Down a broad corridor and past a brightly-lighted room they ran; then on into utter darkness. When a crash of jangling metal echoed ahead, Ross fired at it.

A body fell with a sodden thud.

Cat-silent, paragon at the ready, Ross ran toward the sound.

He tripped and almost fell across his adversary in the darkness. . . a dead adversary; now.

Not quite steadily, Ross flicked on his flamer. . . stared down into the other's face.

It was the man who'd been at Zoltan Prenzz' place; the man who'd later tried to run him down as he headed for Naraki's.

A check of the man's pockets revealed nothing whatever of importance. Bleakly, Ross turned him over.

The move threw the flamer's light onto the stacked cases beside which the dead man lay.

Ross took one look. His hand jerked back by sheer reflex. Hastily, he snapped shut the flamer's lid.

His victim had died resting against row after row of fifty-gallon plastidrums of deadly, hair-trigger steron auxiliary flare-fuel, designed for use in atmospheres where nothing else would burn!

Unsteadily, Ross rose and made his way back to the area close to the lighted room.

A switch-box loomed in the dimness. Ross threw the whole bank.

Like magic, light came to the warehouse. Cases appeared, piled high on either side of long, echoing aisles. Overhead, two catwalks — accessible by ladders — ran the

length of the building, one above the other.

For a moment Ross stood brooding. Then, quickly, he disconnected the lines that served the warehouse lights, leaving only the set that supplied the office area.

Moving into the lighted room, next, he looked about.

A case stood on the central table. . . a neat black plastic cube perhaps six inches high.

Ross suddenly had trouble with his breathing. Not too steadily, he crossed to the table and opened the black cube.

A bracket in the top held a shiny aeroderm injector. Beyond that, the contents resembled a honeycomb — a honeycomb whose each cell was a glistening, hermetically-sealed plastic ampule.

STIFF-FINGERED, Ross closed and sealed the cube again and, gripping it tightly beneath his arm, hurried back to the office next to the street, the one through which he'd entered via the broken window.

In the darkness, something slithered. Ross jumped, then halted, grinning wryly. Going to the outer door, he unbolted and opened it.

Plates rattling, all six feet slithering, the bak scurried out into the night.

Warily, Ross once again surveyed the square outside.

It still seemed deserted. He started forward.

Only then, before he could so much as cross the threshold, something gouged into his back. A familiar, too-dulcet voice said, "No, Thigpen."

Ross stopped short. "Astrell —!"

"Of course." The woman laughed gaily. "You see, Thigpen, I get what I want. I have that kind of perseverance."

Ross said nothing.

"Back, now. Close the door and lock it," Astrell continued. And then: "Aren't you wondering how I got here, dearest? Just this once, haven't I surprised you?"

Ross shrugged.

But apparently no answer was needed or expected. Astrell went on talking anyhow:

"Let's go back where the lights are, Thigpen. I'm dreadfully tired of standing in the dark. And — oh, yes, I found that address on Sanford Hall's closet door too. I must have been right behind you. I'd arranged in advance to meet Sanford, you know — that's why he'd stolen the catalyst, so I'd give him money to buy all the starak he needed for the rest of his life. So I figured out the message, of course, since I'd been to Calor City often years ago, and knew all about Triangle Square. My cruiser put me down here even before you. In fact, I was watching when you

broke in —"

Abruptly, Astrell stopped talking long enough to push Ross into the lighted office. She gestured to the black cube with one puffy hand. "Is that it? Is that the catalyst?"

Ross drew a quick breath. "No, it isn't."

"Don't lie to me! Of course it is!" Astrell's beady eyes grew bright above their pouches. "I'm going to have it right now! I'm going to be young again. You'll see!"

"Will I?" Ross set the cube down on the table. "Or will I just see you drop dead in your tracks?"

"Drop dead —?" The woman's eyes widened. Her wrinkles cut deeper. "You're trying to scare me, aren't you? —To frighten me into giving up the catalyst after all that I've gone through to get it!"

"You think so?" Ross asked tightly. "Let me tell you a few things about this stuff. At the end Tornelescu perfected it, yes. But no one knows whether this batch was made before or after that. At the very best, it's tricky. Not because of the catalyst itself, but because everybody wants fast action. So, Tornelescu made it fast: he tied it in with a metabolic speeder, so that the whole cell structure of your body would change in hours or minutes, instead of weeks or months or years.

If it worked, you'd be young in a hurry.

"The only trouble was, if it didn't work, it killed you. That's how Tornelescu got on Security's 'wanted' list. He was too eager. He tested new batches on living human beings; he didn't care how many died while he was working out the proper balance."

Astell's voice rose. "You lie! You lie!" Her pudgy hands were shaking also. Her face looked as if it were going to crack and fall apart.

"It's up to you," Ross shrugged. "If you think it's worth the gamble, go right ahead and take your chances."

Eyes haunted, Astrell stared at him. "You . . . you really think it . . . might kill me —?"

Wordless, Ross shrugged again.

Only then, sudden in the stillness, a new voice sang out.

Or, rather, in terms of other than this time and place, an old, familiar voice.

The ugly, snarling voice of Cheng the slaver.

"I'm coming in, you — Thigpen, or whatever your name is!" he shouted fiercely. "Don't try to stop me. I've got your girl in-front of me: she'll take the first blast!"

Ross went rigid.

"You! You hear me?"

"Yes. I hear you."

"Stand back, then!"

Ross swept the room with one desperate glance.

It gave him no answers. It didn't even provide shelter. For now, looking up, he saw that the offices actually were part of the storage area, chopped up and cut off with eight-foot, unceilinged partitions.

Cheng again: "You better have that catalyst this time, you chitza! That's what I'm here for. If I don't get it, you won't live to tell it."

Now Astrell looked up, her face a study in unnatural pallor. "The catalyst — he means to take it!"

Ross didn't bother to answer.

Astell cried, "I won't let him! He can't do it!"

Cheng: "Your woman dies if you try to shoot, Thigpen! Just remember that!"

Astell: "I'll take it! That's it, I'll take it now! They say even one injection makes you young!"

SHE STUMBLED forward. Claw-like, her fingers tore at the black cube with the catalyst, the injector.

"Stop it, you old fool!" Ross clipped. He reached out to tear the black box from her.

Without warning, Astrell let go the case. It left Ross hanging momentarily off balance.

Then, before he could recover, she struck out at him with the

paragon she'd held on him earlier. The barrel hit him in the jaw, just below the ear.

Stunned, he lurched back.

Astell ripped the cover from the black case. Snatching out the injector, she forced an ampule into it and with trembling fingers triggered the spray through the skin of her blue-veined arm.

As if it were a signal, Cheng appeared in the doorway, Veta Hall held in front of him as a shield.

Astell laughed wildly. "Come ahead!" she cried, arms spread in a caricature of welcome. "You wanted the catalyst. Here it is. Take it. I don't care. I've had mine — enough to take care of me for years. . ."

Her voice trailed off. An expression of vast surprise spread across her face. Her pudgy hands sagged to her sides.

And then, incredibly, she was changing, changing. Before the others' very eyes, wrinkles began to fade, the slackened skin to firm and fill.

Her body, too — a youth, a slim liveness, came to replace the sagging rolls of flesh not even corsetry could successfully conceal. The auburn hair lost its dull, artificial glitter and, rippling, took on a glow, a natural sheen.

Ross sagged back against the table. The livid scar on Cheng's

cheek twitched and quivered.

Astell laughed aloud; and now, for the first time in the hearing of those present, the sound held warmth and vibrance. . . the laugh of a woman, not a crone. Rising on tiptoe, she lifted her hands high above her head, stretching. Her face, her lips, her eyes, her whole body — they were suffused with a stunning, dazzling beauty.

"Do you wonder now that they married me?" she cried triumphantly, pirouetting. "Seven of them, the richest men in all the outer planets! And lovers—how many lovers did I take? Now I'll have more — more husbands, more lovers! Because I'm young again; I'm beautiful..."

Without warning, her voice trailed off. Her lovely face mirrored sudden shock.

Disregarding Cheng's leveled gun, Ross stepped in quickly; caught the woman's arm. "Astrell! What's wrong?"

She didn't answer. As swiftly as they had come, the gayness, the buoyancy, seemed to have gone out of her. Flat-footed, she stumbled towards the table.

Only then her knees hinged. She started to fall.

Ross levered her arm up, bracing her.

His hands seemed to slip, to slide away. The woman sprawled on the floor. Her breath came in hoarse, labored gasps.

Blankly, Ross looked from her to his hands.

Where his fingers had touched Astrell, slime now dripped from them. . . the same hideous, stinking ooze that had marked the corpse of Zoltan Prenzz, the death of Sanford Hall. . .

Ross' eyes lifted to stare momentarily at Cheng and Veta in numb, dumb horror, then flicked back to Astrell once more.

Astell, a beauty no longer. The features of her face sagged loose and shapeless. Her body seemed to dissolve into the floor.

And everywhere, the ooze, the ooze. . .

A final, sighing breath. Life left her. . .

Choking, Ross stumbled to a corner and tried to scrub the slime from his hands with a ragged jacket that hung there.

Behind him, still poised in the doorway with Veta, Cheng said grimly, "Don't try anything, Thigpen. You're worth money to me. I don't want to kill you."

"That's right, Ross. Oh, absolutely right!"

It was a voice out of nowhere, coolly mocking, familiar yet distorted. Ross, Cheng, Veta — they all turned, startled.

The voice again: "As a matter of fact, Ross, you're even more valuable to me than to Cheng. That's why I'm taking over."

Ross looked up sharply — really up, into the echoing, empty, catwalk-spanned reaches of the warehouse that stretched above the ceilingless partitions of the office rooms.

Adjudicator Pike Mawson's grav-seat hovered there, high above them. Smiling, sociable, he nodded to Ross.

But there was nothing pleasant or sociable about the paragon in his hand. It stayed steady and unwavering.

"As I said, my dear Ross," Mawson murmured, gesturing with the weapon, "I'm taking over."

He pressed a button in the flying chair's control-arm as he spoke.

The seat plummeted down into the room.

CHAPTER VII THIEVES' HONOR

IT WAS ONE of those moments when everything happens at once. For as the grav-seat dropped, Cheng whipped up his gun, firing at Mawson.

Veta Hall screamed.

Ross lunged across the room towards girl and slaver.

Somewhere outside, a blaster sang its twanging, metallic song of death.

Ross crashed into Veta and her captor. Driving his shoulder between them, he jerked the girl from

Cheng's grip, even while he smashed a blow to the outlaw's midriff.

Cheng stared straight ahead — eyes bulged out, jaw hanging. His hands stayed at his sides.

Ross drew back a quick step, uncertainty written on his face.

Cheng swayed for a moment, first forward and then back.

The next instant a violent shudder, plainly visible, ran through him. His paragon clattered to the floor.

Another second and the smuggler himself half-turned and spilled forward on his face.

There was a hole in the small of his back where his spine had been — a hole well-nigh the size of a man's head, the sort of hole torn by a blaster-bolt.

Veta covered her face. Ross clenched his teeth.

Simultaneously, two men stepped into the doorway. One carried a short-barreled blaster, the other a paragon. Both wore grins of sadistic satisfaction.

Now, off to one side, Pike Mawson spoke again: "Good work, gentlemen, though a trifle close. If that beam Cheng triggered had sliced three inches lower, you'd have had to find a new employer."

Mawson moved a dial on his chair's control-plate. The grav-seat swept round in a smooth spiral and set down on the floor in front of Ross.

"Mr. Ross, I believe?" he murmured, eyes asparkle. His face was set in a peculiar way that made him appear on the verge of smiling.

Ross' features stayed wooden. "My name's Thigpen."

"It is?" The adjudicator chuckled, gestured. "Corrack, is this our old friend Tornelescu's helper, Lewis Thigpen?"

A snort from the man with the blaster. "Not even in the dark, he ain't Thigpen."

"You see, Ross?" Mawson spread his hands in a helpless gesture. "Corrack grew up in the same colony with Thigpen. He knows him intimately — drank kabat with him less than an Earth week ago, as a matter of fact. So there's really no point to your trying to continue the imposture."

Ross shrugged, not speaking.

Mawson said, "On the other side of it, I've succeeded in learning your real identity, though it cost me no small expense: you're Stewart Ross, and you hold the rank of special agent with Security. You're twenty - eight years old. You came from Earth, originally. Your most recent assignment was breaking up a theol ring on Titan. You've also dealt with the starak traffic, and with kabatol derivatives in the Uranian satellite system. Your luck has been so spectacular as to indicate real ability,

and in consequence your superiors — even including the famous Commandant Padora — have marked you for special attention and advancement."

A pause. Mawson's fingers drummed on his chair - arm. "That's why I'm here, Ross: because I've learned your identity; because I know the kind of man you are."

"Oh?" Ross' tone was flat and noncommittal.

"Yes." The adjudicator gave strong positive emphasis to the word. He leaned forward. "You see, Ross, I overstepped myself on this life catalyst venture. Badly."

Ross' eyes narrowed, just a fraction.

"In any case," Mawson went on coolly, "I finally find myself in a position where I have no choice but to make a deal with you . . . a very special sort of deal, one I wouldn't chance with anyone less reliable and trustworthy."

Ross frowned. "I don't follow you, Mawson."

It was the other's turn to shrug. "It's very simple really, Mr. Ross. My own age, the sense of years creeping upon me, prejudiced my judgment. So, thinking you were Thigpen, I sent Cheng to Venus to run you down." The adjudicator shook his head sadly. "It was an error, Mr. Ross — a grievous error."

Guile's my forte; I never should have turned to violence."

"I'll agree with you there," Ross nodded, "but I still don't see how this concerns me."

"Don't bait me, Mr. Rossi!" the other snapped back. "That first episode tipped my hand to Cheng, and to Veta Hall, and to Veta's brother, Sanford. The next thing I knew, even Zoltan Prenzz, Security's resident undercover agent on Japetus, was aware of what was going on."

"That meant I had to kill him. So, I sent one of my men to inject him with a dose of the catalyst — a dose from a bad batch my people found in Tornelescu's laboratory when they cut his throat and made off with the formula to begin with."

"But violence breeds violence. Veta Hall's starak - crazy brother stole the bad batch, thinking it was good, proposing to sell it to Astrell."

"I sent my man to get it back. Also, I ordered him to kill Hall, because Hall would have talked in order to get starak."

"Unfortunately, though, Hall managed to pass on my address here before he died. At which point, you came and killed my man, and Astrell died of acute catalytic poisoning, and my people attended to that cutthroat Cheng." Once more, Mawson spread his

hands in the familiar gesture. "Well, Mr. Ross, I believe that brings us up to date."

"Does it?" Ross clipped. "It seems to me you've left out the most important part: the place where I come in."

"For my part, I thought I was being almost too obvious," the adjudicator came back. "My difficulty is that as a result of all this bloodletting, my own tracks have been uncovered. I'm told on reliable authority that Security's already closing in on me. I'll be fortunate if they don't arrest me before dawn."

Ross frowned. "So —?"

"So, as I said before, I need your help."

ROSS SHOOK HIS HEAD. "I still don't see it."

"Then you're a bigger fool than I thought!" Mawson beat his grav-seat's arm in sudden fury. "Don't you understand? When my people brought me Tornelescu's notes, his formulae, I'd have sworn I had the whole universe in my grasp."

"Only then it turned out that all Tornelescu's data was in an arbitrary code: one figure, one symbol, was substituted for another. Consequently, I might as well not have had the papers."

"That's why I sent Cheng after you, when I thought that you were Thigpen: Tornelescu's notes men-

tioned that Thigpen had the code. It was a precaution they took, so that neither of them could betray the other."

"So?" Ross repeated.

"There's still a way out. That is, if you'll just help me." Mawson squirmed in his seat. Of a sudden his eyes were bright and feverish. "Look, Ross, here's how we'll work it: in your role of Security agent, you arrest me. I'll even go so far as to confess to murdering old Tornelescu.

"However, I'll also claim that Sanford Hall stole the papers from me. Consequently, I've no idea whatever where they are or what they say.

"I'll be convicted of killing. They'll send me off to Venus Barracks. In a Martian month the case will be past history.

"That's where you come in, Ross: right then. My conviction will be another feather in your cap. No one would think of suspecting you of anything, let alone denying you full access to Security's files on the case.

"So, you go into those files and dig through them till you find the code. For all I know, it may even be in your property rooms here in Calor City. Because if Lewis Thigpen's dead — and he must be, or you wouldn't have dared to use his name — then all his things will likely be there.

"Then, when you find the code, contact me. I'll tell you where I've hidden the formula: that's how much I trust you.

"You make up a batch of the catalyst. You put it out to the old men, the men of power.

"I'll be free of Venus Barracks in a week. After that — who knows? What limit can there be, when we've eternal life ourselves, plus the privilege of peddling it to others in hundred - year doses?"

The adjudicator was shaking by the time he finished. Twin spots of color marked his cheek bones. His hands moved ceaselessly, without respite.

The silence echoed.

Mawson's hands stopped moving. He straightened in his seat.

"Mr. Ross," he said softly, "I'm afraid I judged you too well. You're indeed a man of honor — so much so that even a lie to save your life sticks in your craw. So I'll put our business on a different level." A pause, heavy with tension. "Mr. Ross, count on it: if you don't carry through to the letter the plan I've outlined, both you and Veta Hall will die, by the most unpleasant mode a fine creative imagination can devise."

Ross seemed to stand a trifle straighter. "I thought that was coming," he nodded slowly. And then: "Fair enough. I'll do all I can to locate Thigpen's things."

"I thought you'd see it my way," Adjudicator Mawson murmured smoothly. He gestured to the two men who still stood in the doorway. "Now that I'm a prisoner, gentlemen, you'd best get out of here. Take the girl with you. You know where to keep her."

The man with the paragon stepped back. But the other, the one called Corrack, didn't move.

Sharply, Mawson said, "Corrack! You heard me!"

"Sure, I heard you," the blaster-man agreed. He grinned, the same sadistic grin that had marked him when he first stepped into the doorway. "Only maybe there's something you don't know."

"Something I don't know —?" Mawson frowned. "Speak up, Corrack! What is it?"

The other's grin broadened. "It's this starbo," he explained, gesturing to Ross. "It's his clothes."

"His clothes —?" Mawson stared. "Well, what about them?"

"Nothing," smirked Corrack. "Nothing at all — *except they're the outfit Thigpen was wearing when I had that drink with him last week!*"

Mawson's head snapped round as if on veloid bearings. "Rack you, Ross —!"

But his tone belied his words, for there was wild jubilation in it. Pounding the air of his flying chair, he cried, "Search him, Cor-

rack! Search him! See if he's got a writer!"

Wordless, the blaster-man obeyed . . . delivered the instrument to Mawson.

FINGERS SHAKING, the adjudicator manipulated the upper end of the carved shaft.

The cap lifted off. A glistening ampule dropped into his hand.

Mawson threw back his head and laughed — peal after peal, hysterical with sheer delight.

Then, sobering, he snatched the aeroderm injector from the table where Astrell had dropped it. Fitting in the ampule, he held the jet against his arm - vein.

"There were some interesting details in Tornelescu's notes, Ross," he announced in a voice that rang with exaltation. "One of them was that Thigpen always carried an ampule of the perfected catalyst in his writer."

He pressed the injector's plunger. The ampule's contents sprayed into his arm.

After that, it was like the time with Astrell, except that Mawson was male, not female.

And, that the process stopped at the proper point, instead of going on into catabolic disaster.

Young now, in the prime of life, glowing with health except for his crippled legs, the adjudicator leaned back in his grav - seat. A slow

smile tugged at the corners of his mouth.

"You understand, don't you, that this changes our situation somewhat, Mr. Ross?" he inquired.

"I understand," Ross answered curtly.

"Good." The other rubbed his hands and chuckled. "As a matter of fact, as I see it, I no longer have any need for your services. Changed as I am, young again, I'll have no trouble hiding till I myself can find or buy Thigpen's code." A pause. "That transforms you, Mr. Ross. It transforms you from an asset to a liability, by my bookkeeping."

Ross didn't answer.

"The same holds for Miss Hall," the adjudicator went on. "Before, she constituted an excellent pawn. Now, she's only a dangerous witness."

Abruptly, he turned to the man with the paragon. "You, my friend! Take this injector" — he touched the aeroderm unit — "and two ampules from the black case. Spray one into each of our friends, here."

Ross went rigid. A horrified cry burst from Veta's throat.

Tightly, Ross said, "Look, Mawson, it's all right to kill me if you want to; I signed on with Security because I had a taste for trouble.

"With Veta, it's different. She's done nothing, hurt no one. She'll

keep quiet —"

"Hurry it up, gentlemen," Mawson ordered his aides. "I want no accidents to halt us now."

"Back, you!" snarled Corrack, covering Ross with his blaster.

His companion advanced on Veta.

Wild-eyed with panic, she retreated before him . . . clear to the wall . . . on around the room . . . almost to the door now; almost to Corrack.

Whirling, then, she leaped at the blaster-man from behind — clutching at his arm, knocking up his weapon.

"Stewart —" she screamed. "Run Stewart; run! Get away! Call Security —"

Ross lunged. But it was towards her, struggling with Corrack; not the door.

Only then purple light pulsed past his head, so close that his eyes went out of focus. He staggered, tripped, pitched to his knees.

And there, off to one side, grav-seat already rising, sat Mawson. His teeth were bared, and he held his paragon poised and ready.

Ross started to rise.

Mawson triggered another ray.

Whirling, Ross plunged through the doorway and ran for his life.

CHAPTER VIII

WRITE IT IN BLOOD!

FEET POUNDED behind Ross in the darkness of the warehouse. Dropping flat, he rolled till he bumped against stacked transit cases.

Now, from the office area, a hand torch flicked this way and that, its hard, bright cone of light lancing through the murk.

Ross held his breath. When the beam passed over him and moved on, he wormed his way swiftly along the cases and into the first cross - aisle.

More lights. More wary shuffling. Hastily, Ross made his way to the next longitudinal aisle, then doubled back in the direction of the offices once more.

Almost in the same instant, Pike Mawson's voice cut through the stillness: "Stop! Both of you!" His words were clipped, incisive.

Ross froze in his tracks. His palms were slick with sweat as they pressed flat against the transit cases.

Mawson again: "Get back here, you fools! Don't you understand? That chitza's trying to feint us away from the entrance so he can blast out!"

From beyond Mawson, a second voice mumbled unclear syllables.

"Let him hide!" Mawson cut in sharply. "He'll soon tire of it. The thing to remember is: that there's no way out of this place except through the office area; I

made sure of that before we took it over. So as long as we stay at this end, our fine friend can't escape."

A burst of guttural elation. Ross' pursuers drew back into the brightly - lighted offices.

For a long moment Ross stood unmoving. Then, as the last echo of the others' clumping footsteps died and the darkness closed in on taut, vibrant silence, he turned. His face was pale and drawn, his breathing shallow, his mouth a thin, grim line.

Moving down the aisle cat - silent, he groped his way to the place his earlier foe had died beside the stacked plastidrums of steron.

Steron, with its deadly methane fumes, and high combustibility, and flaring, 4000 - degree heat.

Ross' lips twisted. Dragging out one of the drums, he jerked savagely at the opener tab.

The cap tore away. With a momentary faint hiss of gas escaping, steron fumes spurted forth in a choking, all - enveloping rush.

Ross grinned mirthlessly. With swift efficiency, he dragged out a second drum and opened it also. Then a third. . . a fourth . . .

Turning this last tank on its side, he rolled it full - tilt down the aisle towards the offices, a trail of fumes and liquid spilling out in its wake.

Now, drawing back into a cross-aisle, Ross flicked his flamer and tossed it out onto the snake-like steron trail.

The fumes caught even before the flamer struck the floor. With a roar like the gush of a power hose, fire leaped back to the three open drums.

The explosion as they ignited sprayed flame in a mad starburst that illumined the whole central section of the warehouse. In seconds a thunderous holocaust swirled roof-high.

Ross sprinted for the office area. Scrambling up a ladder to the first catwalk, he peered down into the rooms below.

Already Mawson's men were running for the door to the street. But of Mawson himself, and of Veta Hall, there was no sign.

Breathing hard, Ross moved on along the catwalk.

Now, abruptly, Mawson came into view, racing his grav-seat out away from a spot where two partitions intersceted, and into the open area in the center of one of the larger rooms. His movements were jerky, and he sat hunched forward in the seat, an air of tension heavy upon him.

The next instant Veta appeared, darting after the adjudicator. An ugly bruise showed on her forehead. Panting, stumbling, she snatched at Mawson's tunic.

But he dodged and flipped up an elbow sharply, so that it struck the girl in the mouth. Then, as she sagged back momentarily, he swung the chair in, and slammed a palmed paragun flat to the side of her head.

Veta crumpled to the floor . . . lay there in a limp, still heap.

Instantly, Mawson whirled the grav-seat away again, racing it up over the room's partitions in a swift, spiraling arc.

Ross held his position on the catwalk like a statue. Only his eyes moved — first flicking down to Veta's motionless form, then away from her and up to Mawson.

Still the grav-seat climbed. Mawson gave hardly a glance to the roaring sea of flame that now enveloped the whole central area of the warehouse. His face was lined and set, his eyes riveted on some spot in the building's upper reaches.

Ross stared after him. Then, turning, once again he looked down at the office area.

Veta Hall still lay unmoving where she'd fallen.

Ross started along the catwalk towards her.

Only then, as if his eyes somehow were drawn by some psychic magnet, he paused in mid-stride and yet another time looked around for Mawson.

Simultaneously, the other's grav-

seat came to rest on the second, higher catwalk, close, under the roof. Unfastening the seat's safety belt, Mawson thrust his twisted legs down onto the walk, dragged himself to his feet, hobbled clumsily to a nearby switch - box and pulled a lever.

A FAINT GRINDING of gears rose above the noise of the fire. Twin roof - plates slid back to reveal a skylight.

For the fraction of a second Ross hesitated. Then, pivoting, he ran for the nearest ladder that stretched upward from his catwalk to Mawson's.

Above him, the adjudicator slapped shut the switch - box and began a slow - shuffling return to the grav - seat.

Ross reached the ladder. Catagile, he swung up it, hand over hand, two rungs at a time.

Mawson reached the grav-seat as Ross topped the ladder and scrambled up onto the catwalk.

Now, pausing for a moment as he adjusted the seat's safety belt, the older man — young now — gazed out across the holocaust, a sardonic smile twisting his thin lips. Sweat streamed down his pale face and dripped from his chin. Puffing a little, he swabbed his forehead with his sleeve.

Behind him, Ross silently crept forward through the well - nigh

unendurable heat in a half - crouch. His lips were parted, the skin taut and shiny across his cheek bones.

Mawson glanced up at the open skylight. His hand dropped to the seat's arm. His fingers moved over the controls.

The chair lifted just a fraction, till it hovered clear of the catwalk.

Ross' eyes distended. Nostrils flaring, he broke into a headlong run.

But the catwalk vibrated under the impact of his weight. As if by reflex, his quarry's shoulders stiffened. The fingers on the control - arm spun a dial. The seat whipped round like a pointer on a pivot.

For an instant, then, the eyes of the two men met.

Mawson expelled a sudden breath. His lips peeled back in a death's - head grin. His free hand whipped up the paragon.

Eight feet, possibly, separated the two of them now. Not even breaking stride, Ross dived for Mawson.

Nimble - fingered, the adjudicator flipped switches. The grav-seat rocked back out of reach like a swing, then forward again in a short arc that smashed the chair's base against Ross' shoulder with numbing force as he sprawled off-balance on the catwalk.

Rolling with the blow, Ross went half off the narrow footway. Be-

fore he could recover, Mawson spun the seat again. It swished down like a powered sledge.

Spasmodically, Ross threw himself clear off the walk, dangling in mid-air, suspended by the fingers of one hand only.

Above him, Pike Mawson's face contorted in a leer. The seat ground on the edge of the catwalk, searching for his fingers.

Jaws clenched, Ross swung side-wise violently, letting go of the footway with his one hand as he hooked on with the other.

It was like hanging from a spit above a literal inferno. Flames roared below him. The draft that swept from the building's entrance up to the open skylight carried heat like a chimney.

Again, Mawson tried to grind the grav - seat down on Ross' fingers.

Again, Ross swung clear.

Mawson cursed aloud, then leaned far forward over the front of the seat and leveled his paragon at Ross' head.

Free arm flailing, Ross let go his precarious grip on the catwalk and lunged upward towards Mawson, paragon and grav - seat. His clawing fingers locked around the weapon's barrel.

For frantic seconds they hung there thus, struggling for the paragon. Twice, Mawson triggered charges. Both times, they went

wide.

But now Ross had a grip on seat as well as weapon. With a sudden jerk, he wrenched the gun from the other's hand. It spun away in a long, catapulting arc that ended in the flames below.

Like lightning, Mawson thumbed a button set in the grav - seat's control - arm.

The chair came down on the catwalk with a crash, then bounced high into the air, almost to the roof. Ross' nails gouged long tracks in the seat's plastox upholstery as his fingers slipped under the shock.

MAWSON SPUN A DIAL. The grav - seat whipped round in a tight circle that all but hurled Ross clear across the warehouse by sheer centrifugal force.

White to the lips, Ross clutched at Mawson's safety belt.

The adjudicator spun the dial the other way. Simultaneously, he caught the hand on his belt by a forefinger and levered the member back so violently as to make the snap of its fracture audible even through the din of the fire.

Ross gave a low, hoarse cry. He smashed a fist down on the fingers with which Mawson gripped the grav - seat's controls.

It was Mawson's turn to jerk back; cry out. Gripping the control - arm with cable - taut fingers,

corded muscles standing out along his forearms, Ross twisted.

Metal screeched a protest. The seat rocked violently.

Ross wrenched again.

A contact - point snapped. Connections tore loose. Sideslipping, out of control, the seat careened down to a precarious landing athwart the catwalk.

Convulsively, Mawson beat at Ross' face — raking the cheeks, stabbing for the eyes.

Ducking his head, Ross levered the control - arm still farther out of place.

A sound close to that of a sob echoed in Mawson's throat. He pounded Ross' back. "Stop it, you fool! Stop it, before you kill us both!"

Panting with strain, Ross paused for an instant.

Mawson, babbling: "Don't you see? There's no way left for us to get out of here except that skylight — and it's too high to do us any good without the grav - seat."

A small, spasmodic ripple of movement, like the passing of a chill, crossed Ross' shoulders. He still didn't speak.

"Turn me in to FedGov Security if you want to, rack you!" raged Mawson. "Do you think I care about that? Just get us out of this hell - hole alive; that's all I ask!"

Ross raised his head a fraction; stared down at the sea of flame

below.

Mawson again — a cunning, crafty Mawson this time: "Think of the girl, Ross! Think of her, even if you don't give a filan for your own neck! She'll roast, down there in that office! But you still may be able to save her, if we get around to the street entrance fast enough."

Ross breathed in sharply. He started to straighten.

Twisting in his seat, Mawson peered back and down over his own shoulder. Then, suddenly, he leveled a shaking finger. "Ross! Look—!"

Ross craned forward, staring.

Like lightning, Mawson whipped back his elbow . . . smashed it to the bridge of Ross' nose with the same savage force that had stunned Veta Hall.

Ross lurched backwards.

Mawson spun the chair's control - dial. Wobbling, unsteady, the grav - seat started upward.

Only then Ross, reeling, caught the seat's base. His upflung hand slapped the control - plate. His fingers hooked around its edges. Again, muscles stood out along his forearm as he brought sudden pressure.

The plate tore loose. The grav-seat dropped back onto the catwalk with a crash.

Tight - lipped, with no sign that he so much as heard Pike Mawson's

shriek of anguish, Ross hurled the control unit down into the roaring fire below . . .

IT WAS QUIET in this place...
so very, very quiet.

Only then, ever so faintly, a door - hinge creaked. Shoes whispered across synthoflooring.

For a long moment, Ross still lay unmoving.

The whispering shoes drew closer — enough shoes for several pairs of feet.

Slowly, Ross opened his eyes.

A tall, slim man stood beside the bed — a man whose dark blue uniform bore silver comets on its shoulder - straps.

Ross straightened just a trifle. Voice faint, he whispered, "Commandant Padora . . ."

The tall man inclined his head in a small, precise nod. "My congratulations, Mr. Ross."

A muscle in Ross' cheek twitched. "Congratulations —?" And then, more definitely, more firmly: "Congratulations for what?"

"For successfully completing your mission."

Ross said, "I didn't complete it. The formula —"

"The formula has been recovered," the Security commandant interrupted smoothly. "Adjudicator Mawson told us precisely where to find it. Also, he confessed to murdering Doctor Tornelescu."

Ross stared. "*He confessed?*"

Commandant Padora glanced to one of the blue - uniformed men who stood behind him. "He did, didn't he, Mr. Galacorri?"

"He seemed quite eager to," the other answered dryly. "He had some strange notion our rescue party might leave him on that catwalk if he didn't."

The shadow of a smile played round the corners of the commandant's mouth. "In any event, Mr. Ross, Doctor Tornelescu's life catalyst now is in our hands, available for properly - controlled research, development and use. And I'm told that Mr. Mawson undoubtedly will spend the added years of life the injection gave him in a cell."

"I see."

"There's another matter also, Mr. Ross: the matter of your own disobedience of orders." Commandant Padora's grey eyes seemed to study the blank wall before him. "To set your mind at rest, I plead guilty to using you uncomfortably like a cat's - paw. By so restricting you as to precipitate insubordination, I temporarily convinced Cheng and Mawson that you were a free agent. As a result, they acted rashly, without covering their tracks properly. That's how we came to close in when we did; to have men and lines at hand to drop down through that skylight and take you off the catwalk after

you'd collapsed from shock and heat."

"I see," Ross said again.

"In consequence of all this," the other went on with clipped precision, "the Federated Governments feel you've earned a certain recompense in terms of honor." He held out a hand to one of the men behind him. "Mr. Livingston. . ."

"Here, sir." The man laid a flat leather case on the commandant's palm.

"Stewart Ross" — Commandant Padora stood very erect now — "it is my privilege as commandant of the Federated Governments' integrated security agencies to present you at this time with our highest honor, the Starburst Medal First Class for service to humanity above and beyond the call of duty."

He leaned forward as he finished; took the silver decoration from its case and pinned it to the breast of Ross' sleeper jacket.

"Thank you, sir," Ross said. "I do appreciate it."

The other eyed him keenly. "Your face doesn't match your

words, Mr. Ross," he observed. "Perhaps it's because you feel you've lost something more important to you than all the Fed-Gov's medals."

And then, pivoting: "Miss Hall!"

For the first time, Ross' head lifted from its pillow. The hand that clutched his coverlet suddenly was shaking.

In the same moment, the blue-uniformed group behind Commandant Padora parted.

And there was Veta Hall.

Pressing between the men, she darted to Ross; fell on her knees beside his bed. And though her dark eyes streamed tears and her forehead still showed its ugly bruised streak, never had her face been lovelier or more radiant.

"Stewart—!" she choked. "Oh, Stewart, my darling. . ."

Ross' lips cut off her words.

"As I said," Commandant Padora announced to no one in particular, "Mr. Ross' efforts gave us both the time and opportunity to take care of all aspects of the situation at Mawson's warehouse."

It was doubtful if Ross and Veta even heard him. . .

★ *Flaming Question* ★

RECENTLY a prominent scientist was asked to name one of the most difficult and challenging problems in applied science of our day, a problem about which very

little was known.

The surprise of everyone, most expecting some abstruse problem in nuclear physics, he replied that the problem lay in thermodynamics—

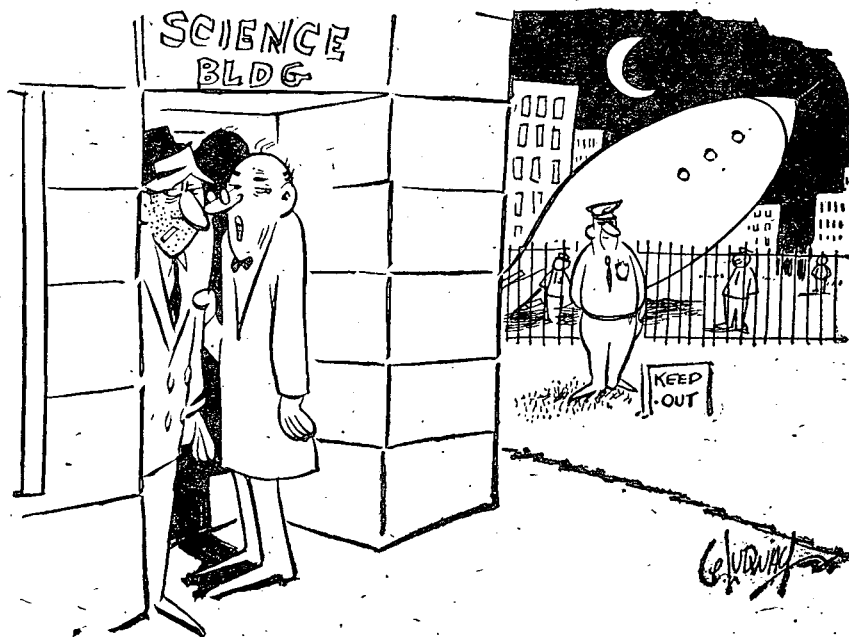
how does a flame burn?

This question, "how does a flame take place?" is the subject of a tremendous amount of research. Combustion, the oldest chemical process we know, still is full of unanswered questions. This may seem strange in light of the enormous advances made in vastly more specialized subjects, but it is true. An ordinary candle or gas flame is a mysterious thing.

The prominence of the question comes from its immensely utilitarian value today. Jet engines, gas turbines and rocket motors depend upon a knowledge of combustion. It

is a miracle that they work as well as they do considering little is known about what happens in the interior of a flame. Fortunately Nature has been kind, and most flames inherently work well. But "well" isn't good enough for a jet, turbine or rocket.

The result is that there are now established many laboratories whose sole function is gas and flame analysis. Part of the problem is that the combustion process occurs in gases which are travelling with terrific velocities. Studying chemical combination at two thousand miles an hour is hard going!



"It's a deal then. A hundred dollars each — I'll need a crew of ten."

JOHN HOLDER'S WEAPON

by

Robert Moore Williams

Holder hated his Communist captors so much he wished them out of existence. Impossible, of course—and yet they vanished before his eyes . . .

“**G**ET THE HELL out of my sight, Nocher!” Holder shouted.

The scientist had held his temper ever since he had been taken captive. This had set up such a condition of strain within him that even in his dreams, he had seen himself destroying Reds. He had blown them up with hydrogen bombs, he had destroyed them with death rays, he had disintegrated them with weapons that no other mind had ever imagined. Most of all, he had hated the poking, prying political commissars, who had breathed down his neck in every experiment he had ever attempted, or had watched from the TV camera installed in every laboratory of the vast installation, to make certain that any discovery that was made went to the right place.

But even Holder's most fantastic

dreams were nothing in comparison to what actually happened.

Nocher was a big man, standing six foot two inches tall. There was Cossack blood in him, which gave him a vast feeling of superiority for all men not of his race. This was particularly true of the captive scientists being held prisoner in this secret Ural stronghold. In spite of the fact that every one of them had a better brain than he had, the political commissar looked down upon them as being creatures of an inferior race.

As Holder shouted at the Commissar, Nocher lost his expression of superiority. His face turned a dim shade of blue, then a thin shade of white.

Then, clothes and all, he vanished.

Nocher went like smoke before the wind, roiling and turning. When he vanished, he left a vague outline



of a human body behind him which looked like a hole in space, like a ghost outlined against a gray sky. Then this vanished too. Of Nocher's bulk, not even a wisp was left.

John Holder was aware of thundering elation somewhere deep down inside of him. There was horror too, but the elation was greater. He stared at the empty spot where the commissar had been standing a moment before.

Sounds came from his lips but he had no conscious knowledge that he was uttering them. They were noises that had existed long before language had come into being. Their meaning was pure horror. As they came from his lips, Holder felt every muscle in his stomach begin to tighten into a knot.

There was absolutely no question in his mind that he was responsible for Nocher's disappearance. Out of his dreams, out of his hate for the commissars and all they represented, this ability had been created. A million to one chance had come true! This ability was something he did inside himself. It needed no outside equipment to function, no generators to feed energy to it, no crystals to control its frequency. It was its own generator and its own frequency control! And it was all in his own mind! It was new, it was totally different from anything any scien-

tist had ever envisioned before.

In this moment, staring at the spot where Nocher had been, John Holder felt as if the concrete floor on which he was standing had no more real substance to it than empty space. All that existed was mind, energy, and the dance of the atoms. He also knew that everything he had thought he had known about science was drivel, the mouthings of an idiot. The string of degrees after his name, which had so impressed the Red and had led to his capture by a nation hungry for scientists and willing to go to any lengths to get them, became meaningless, fodder for the amazement of fools.

The only important reality in the Universe was mind. Everything else was subservient to this reality. Mind was flooding through him now as glowing shafts of light.

"Nocher?" the loudspeaker in the ceiling rasped.

The sound jarred John Holder back to his surroundings. He turned startled eyes upward. From the ceiling, the bland eye of the television camera regarded him in silent accusation. He swore beneath his breath. How much had they seen?

The television system, which spied in every nook and corner of the huge installation, had been Nocher's idea, his way of making

absolutely certain that he knew everything that was going on among the captive scientists working here.

The security police had felt that the TV system was a fine idea. There was no way of predicting what a scientist might discover, or when he would find it out. Perhaps it would be a new weapon that would enable them to conquer the world. This was what scientists were for. This was the reason the whole vast institute existed here in secret.

"Nocher?" the loudspeaker inquired again.

"He went—that way." Holder said quickly, pointing toward an open door.

THE LOUDSPEAKER went silent. Holder hastily turned his attention back to the lab table, where an experiment was in progress. His head was a whirl. It seemed to him that the whole center of his cranium was a ball of light. He knew beyond a doubt that this correlated with his ability to disintegrate Nocher. The next problem would be to test the process, in secret, and discover its limits, if any. Did it have any limits? A body, flesh, bone, blood, had gone—like that. He went from the table to his desk. With a knowledge that the TV camera was watching every move he made, he pretended to be

busy studying a sheaf of reports on the experiment in progress. From the back of his desk, a photograph with three smiling faces looked at him—Marie and Johnny and Teresa. His wife and their two kids. They were here too, in his apartment, hostages for his good behavior and for his efficient performance.

The three-faces in the photograph were the biggest reason why he hated Nocher, and all of Nocher's kind and all that Nocher had stood for.

They had been vacationing in the Swiss Alps two years before when all four had been kidnapped. It had been as simple as that. An American scientist and his family had vanished from Switzerland. Presumably they had been taken behind the Iron Curtain but no one in America knew this for certain. Nor would anyone in the western world have been able to do anything about it if they had known the facts. Holder assumed that a search had been made for him. Possibly a protest had been lodged with the Russian government. If so, like so many other protests, it had come to nothing. Power was all that was respected in this part of the world.

He grinned to himself. Since power was all they respected, he would show them some!

He looked up. An armed guard,

one of the hated security police, had entered the room.

"The commandant orders your présence," the guard said.

"Tell the commandant to go to —" Holder caught his tongue in the nick of time. He forced a polite smile to his face. "I will be glad to call on the commandant."

"At once," the guard said.

"Certainly," Holder said, rising. With a farewell glance at the framed photograph on his desk, the scientist left the lab. Why was he breathing so heavily?

The commandant was a big man with a bald head and arm muscles that made bulges in the sleeves of his uniform. An ex-spy, to a man the scientists here in this installation hated him. He sat behind a plain oak desk and played with a Turkish dagger that he used as a paper knife. Rumor had it that in the days when he had acted as an executioner, he had used this knife to slit the throats of his victims. He did not bother to be polite to a mere scientist. They were dogs to be used for the benefit of the state.

"You were the last one to see Nocher," the commandant said.

"The *last one* to see him?" Holder questioned. "I do not understand. Is he dead?"

"I will ask the questions, you will answer them," the commandant

stated. "What happened to Nocher?" He was so sure of his power that he did not bother to play his usual game of cat and mouse.

"I do not know that anything happened to him." Holder answered quickly. "He was in my lab, talking, then he went away."

"How did he go away?"

The scientist shrugged. "I didn't really notice. We chatted for a few moments, then I turned my attention again to my work. When I looked up, he was gone. I get the impression from your questions that something is wrong. May I ask—"

"You may not. I will do the asking. What did you do to Nocher?"

"Nothing," Holder promptly answered.

"I saw you do it." The commandant pointed to the television screen on his desk.

"You saw me do what?" Holder said. Anger was rising in him. Again he had the impression that the inside of his head was filling with light.

"I saw you destroy him, with the new discovery you have made!" A wolfish grin appeared on the Commandant's face and he looked like a Red who has just found a way to achieve his heart's desire of swallowing the world.

Holder saw what was happening. The commandant harbored a secret desire to be a ruler. Another Mussolini, another Stalin! If the commandant could win possession of the discovery he thought Holder had made, he might become another Genghis Khan, to scourge the world with flame and death.

"You're utterly crazy!" Holder shouted.

"You have discovered a disintegrating ray and I want it." The commandant continued as if he had not heard a word the scientist had said. "I'm also going to get it." He flicked a button and motioned Holder to look at the TV screen. Revealed there were Marie and Johnny and Teresa. The kids were playing their eternal game of hide and seek and were waiting for him to return home to play it with them. At the sight, Holder felt his heart turn over inside him.

"You wouldn't harm them," he whispered. "You wouldn't dare."

The commandant now looked like a Red who had just swallowed the whole solar system. "Wouldn't I?" he answered. The wolf grin on his face had spread from ear to ear.

"Get to hell out of my sight!" Holder shouted.

THE LAST HE SAW of the commandant as the latter went away was the wolfish grin.

There was a startled expression on the grin as the man vanished like something had happened that was not on schedule.

Holder walked quietly out of the room and down the corridor. Behind him, he heard an alarm bell go off. The pound of heavy boots answering the alarm bell followed. He moved faster. A shout to halt followed. He dodged around a corner in the corridor and began to run.

He knew now that he would be followed to the ends of the earth. For him, and those dear to him, there was no hiding place. His conversation with the commandant had been monitored. Now that the commandant was gone, the next in command automatically stepped into his shoes. He knew what he was going to do, what he *had* to do. Perhaps—the vague hope was in his mind—if he could disintegrate bodies, he could also re-integrate them. He did not know if he could do this and there was no time to find out. There was only time to act, and hope.

Feet pounded behind him along the corridor. On the roof of the building, a siren began to wail. All security forces were being called out.

He slipped from the building, dodged around a concrete statue, and ran as fast as his legs could

carry him toward the living quarters provided here. This was a three-story concrete structure. As he slid into the entrance of this building, whistles were shrilling behind him and armored car motors were beginning to roar. The air was still vibrating with the shrill screaming of the alarm siren. A guard had sighted him and was in hot chase behind.

With the feet of the guard clumping behind him, John Holder ran down the third floor hall toward his apartment. A shot rang out behind him and the bullet chipped plaster from the wall at the end of the corridor. A hoarse shout to halt sounded. He snatched open the door and was inside. His wife, her face a question mark, came toward him. Panting, he leaned against the wall. With one hand, he shot the latch on the door.

"I thought I heard a shot," Marie said.

He nodded.

Her face lost all its color. "Then—it's come?" Each had secretly wondered what would happen when the inevitable hour came when Holder's work was no longer satisfactory. They could not be returned to Switzerland. They knew too much. Would it be Siberia? Or a quick death? What would happen to the children?

Again Holder nodded.

"Daddy! Daddy's home!" This was six year old Johnny shouting the good news to Teresa. The boy came running to throw himself toward his father. Holder stooped and picked him up.

"You're going to play games with us tonight?" Johnny demanded. "You're going to play hide and seek?"

"Your father is very tired right now dear," Marie said quickly. "Later he will play with you."

"Sure," Holder said. "Sure. Later." He made no effort to release the boy. Four year old Teresa, carrying her teddy bear, was also making a bee-line for him. She did not intend to be left out of the fun. Holder caught her up in his free arm.

Hob-nailed boots pounded to a halt outside the door. A heavy knock sounded. Marie turned toward the door. Holder shook his head. Down the corridor a command rasped out. Abruptly the knocking ceased. "Let 'em break it down," Holder said. "That will give me enough time." He ignored the questions on his wife's face.

"Somebody want in, daddy?" Johnny inquired. "Who is it?"

"The big bad bear," Holder answered. "But don't worry. He won't get you. I won't let him." To Marie, he said, "Look out the window and tell me what you see."

"An armored car has just pulled up in front," she said. "They have set up machine guns on each corner of the block."

"Thorough devils," Holder commented.

"What's a devil, daddy?" Johnny asked.

"It's just a word," Holder answered.

Marie moved across the room to him. "John," she said. Then again, "John—"

"Don't be alarmed, darling," Holder said. "It's only death."

"It's only—" She sat down so quickly that he thought her legs had given way beneath her.

"That's only a word too," Holder said quickly.

"It—it—" Her lips twisted and a choking movement started in her throat. "How can you say it's only a word when it's the most real fact in our existence right now?"

"Is death a fact, or is it another human delusion?" the scientist asked.

"John!" Her eyes were fixed on him with terrible intensity.

"I'm not nuts," he said. "The men outside setting up the machine guns are the ones who are crazy, not me." Deep inside he was quite sure he meant what he had said.

"What are they going to do with the guns, daddy?" Johnny asked.

"Guns, daddy," Teresa echoed.

"They're going to use them to make loud noises," Holder answered. "If I try to run, they will point them at me and make loud noises and I will fall down."

"And go boom?" Teresa asked. She thought this was amusing.

JOHNNY SUDDENLY SENSED the seriousness of the situation. "I don't want you to fall down, daddy," he said.

"That's the kind of world we live in," Holder answered. "Sooner or later, everybody has to fall down. There's a law—"

"John!" Marie spoke.

"Which do you want?" Holder answered. "If I fall down, I'll never get up. Do you want to spend the rest of your life in this kind of a world, where you will become the plaything of barracks soldiers. Do you want—"

"John!"

"Do you want the kids to be raised as wards of the state, where they will be conditioned into accepting the idea that this world is right?" Holder gestured toward the windows.

Marie's face revealed mute agony. "N- - no. But— isn't there some other way?"

"Sure," the scientist said. He set the kids on the floor.

Marie's face gleamed with sudden hope like a rainbow seen at the

world's end.

A knock sounded on the door.

The rainbow vanished from her face. She looked toward the door.

"Get the hell out of my sight!" Holder said to her.

She went as Nocher and the commandant had gone. Except that she went smiling. Her smile seemed to linger in the air, like a bright gleam from some far-off heaven, after she had gone.

"Where mommy go?" Teresa inquired.

"Yeah where'd she go?" Johnny added. "She was sitting right there just a minute ago—"

"We will break down the door if you don't open up," a voice said outside.

"Just a minute," Holder yelled. He looked at his son. Why was it so difficult to concentrate now? "Johnny," he said. His voice was a hoarse gasp.

"Yes, dad."

"Get the hell out of my sight."

The boy went easily and rapidly. Johnny did not seem to mind. It was as if to him there was nothing bad about this experience. And possibly nothing new.

Holder wiped sweat from his face. Was he sure? Did he really know what he was doing? Was he certain? There had been no time for testing.

Teresa, staring around the room,

was searching for her idol. "Johnny!" she called. When there was no answer, she looked up at her father and announced, "Johnny is hiding." This was the beginning of a game.

Holder forced a smile to his face. "Do you want to go find him?"

She clapped her hands in joy. "Sure. Find Johnny."

Why was this tic in his right cheek and this sudden tremor in his hands? Did this child with the bright blue eyes mean so much to him that he could not send her after her mother and brother, that he could not protect her from the men on the other side of the door? Why this sudden sweat all over his body?

"Get—" His voice faltered into silence. A knot as big as his fist was in his throat.

"Find Johnny, daddy," Teresa urged.

Bang! The butt of a rifle crashed against the door, giving Holder the strength that he needed. "Get the hell out of my sight," he said.

She went even easier than Johnny had gone as if the younger they were, the easier this process was. She went laughing and giggling. She was going to find Johnny. This was a game of hide and seek, which she had always enjoyed.

Holder tried to swallow the knot in his throat. He moved to the

mirror, stood regarding himself in it. Why was his heart pounding so heavily. He, of all men on earth, knew and could prove, that the human body was only a mental construction, that the very atoms in it were held together by the force of a patterned idea, and by nothing else. The pattern on which the body was constructed, the blue-print for the bones, flesh, and organs, this was an idea, and nothing more. The flesh and bones, the blood and sinew, that gave reality to the idea, were in reality only the bricks and mortar, the lumber and metal, that gave reality to an architect's blue-print of a house. When the house burned down, or was otherwise destroyed, the *idea* still remained. It, and it alone, had life. It, and it alone, had immortality.

Why was sweat spurting from every pore in his body?

Crash! Behind him, the door fell inward.

"Get the hell out of my sight!" he said staring at his reflection in the mirror.

Nothing happened. The mirror clearly revealed the puzzled frown on his face and the look of bewilderment in his eyes. It also revealed three men approaching from behind.

Holder knew he had failed. He had thought that all he would need

to do would be to look at himself in a mirror—and go with the others. Something had gone wrong.

"I was only sending them ahead of me," he whispered. "I meant to go too." The agony inside him was as deep as space. He made no effort to resist the men when they grabbed him.

THEY TOOK HIM directly to the deepest underground cell in the headquarters building. He had heard whispered rumors of this place from the other scientists here but he had never really believed it existed. They chained him to the wall so that his feet did not touch the floor. He looked at the chains, and wondered if they would go away when he told them to.

A little man with the face of a rat entered the cell and the others withdrew. Rat-face was the interrogator. Obviously Rat-face had had vast experience with political prisoners. He knew all the questions to ask and all the torture methods. Holder dimly wondered what tales the walls of this tiny, barren cell could tell if they had the ability to speak.

"Where is Nocher?"

"In hell, I hope."

"Ah!"

"I did it," Holder said. "I confess everything, I destroyed Nocher. I eliminated the commandant.

All I ask is that you shoot me, at once."

The rat face revealed mixed pleasure and chagrin. Prisoners were supposed to confess. But not so quickly. Rat-face felt cheated. He enjoyed torturing the helpless.

"What about your wife? Did you destroy her too?"

"Yes."

"And your children?"

"Yes."

Rat-face counted on nicotine-stained fingers. "That makes you five times a killer."

"Yes. Shoot me," Holder begged. The agony inside him was growing deeper. Visions of Teresa going away danced before his eyes. What had he actually done to her?

"What did you do with the bodies?"

"I—"

"You have admitted you killed them. You must have hid the bodies some place."

Rat-face had not been properly briefed by the new commandant. He thought he was dealing with murder! Holder glanced up at the ceiling. The TV camera and the microphone were there. Probably the new commandant was watching this scene from some safe place.

"Where did you hide the bodies?" Rat-face continued.

"Try and find them!" The laughter that followed was wild and

Holder knew it. This fact didn't matter. The political commissars thought all scientists were crazy anyhow. Except when they made atom bombs. To a political commissar, atom bombs made sense. They could be dropped on the heads of people who didn't agree with them.

"How did you do it?" Rat-face demanded. His little beady eyes bored into Holder as he asked this question.

"Like this," Holder answered. "Get the hell out of my sight."

His laughter continued for minutes, at the funny expression on the little political commissar's face as Rat-face had gone away. No one else came into the cell. Holder concentrated his attention on his chains. He repeated the magic formula. The chains remained as firm as ever. He stared at them in growing fear. Here was one thing that did not obey his command to vanish.

"If I had only had time to test!" he muttered. He tried to pull himself free from the chains. They had been designed and built to prevent exactly this. He exhausted himself with no result then left off his efforts when he realized he was hearing the sound of running water.

His feet were wet.

He looked down and saw that the bottom of his cell was covered by

water. "A pipe broke somewhere," he thought. Looking up toward the TV camera on the ceiling, he yelled, "Hey! You had better repair that pipe before you drown one of your prisoners."

There was no question in his mind as to what lay ahead for him. He would be questioned for days, for weeks, if necessary, until they had gotten his secret from him. The new commandant, and the powers above him, would use up any number of political commissars to achieve their goal. Political commissars were cheap. Secrets such as the one John Holder possessed were very important.

The water was up to his ankles. He saw, then, the purpose of this cell. It had been constructed so that water could be turned into it. The helpless wretch who had been left chained to the wall here could either confess or he could drown. The cell was actually a death trap.

Now he understood why no one else had taken the place of Rat-face!

In dazed horror, he watched the water rise to his knees. The sound was now that of a roaring torrent. He knew that his unseen watchers had opened the valve still wider.

The water rose to his chest, constricted a cold band there, then surged upward to his throat.

"Help!" he screamed involun-

tarily.

Instantly he heard the valve close. The sound of the torrent stopped.

"Do you talk now?" the speaker on the ceiling asked.

"I—" In this moment of terrible threat, he knew he would talk, not to save his life, but because he could not help himself, because he could not keep from talking. He knew, also, that there was nothing he could put into words which would reveal what he knew to be true. "I— I can't."

A GAIN THE VALVE was opened, again the water came into the narrow cell. It reached Holder's chin. He knew now that they fully intended to drown him if he didn't reveal what he knew. From the viewpoint of the watchers, it was better that he should die, than that they should take a chance on letting him escape to tell what he knew to someone else!

"I can't tell you," he screamed. "It won't go into words. It's something I do inside my mind."

"Talk!" the loudspeaker answered.

"But I'm telling you that I can't —" His voice took on the sound of a gargle as water poured into his mouth. He spat it out and tried to scream. The water, rising higher, poured into his mouth. He twisted

his head upward, shoving against the chains that held him to the wall. The water reached his nose and flowed downward into his lungs.

Within a minute, at most, the level of the water would be hastily lowered. After he was revived he would be given a chance to tell what he knew. If he still proved obstinate, the process would be repeated. But Holder did not know this.

Some prisoners had withstood repeated duckings, only to be drowned in the end. Most told everything they knew after the first treatment.

Inside him, John Holder knew that the human body was only a mental construction. Only the strength of an idea held flesh and bones and blood together. He also knew there was no way on earth for him to reveal this secret to another person, in words. Perhaps long and careful study of the nature and the kinds of energies involved would enable him to give a mathematical description of what he knew he could do inside of him. The Reds would never wait for such a study to be made. They were looking for something as simple and as dramatic as *E is equal to MC squared*, the basic equation that had served for the mathematical springboard for the atom

bomb.

As the water poured into his nose and down into his lungs, he made one last furious effort. The process had worked on other people. How could he make it work on him? An answer popped into his mind. All he had to do was to think of himself as another person.

He did this. Light exploded through his brain and flooded through his whole body.

When the water level was lowered, the bewildered Reds found empty chains dangling from the walls of the cell. The body they had placed in the chains was no longer there.

Three days later, the driver of an American jeep, on border patrol at night with a squad of men, was astonished to find four bodies suddenly appear within his headlights. To him, they seemed to come out of nowhere. Brakes screaming, the driver jerked the jeep to a halt. The sergeant in charge of the squad hastily dismounted.

"I am John Holder and this is my wife and our two children," the man in the glare of the headlights said.

"Holder?" the sergeant said. "Say, we've got a search order out for you. You vanished behind the iron curtain."

"We have come back through it,"

Holder answered. "Take us to your commanding officer, at once."

They were put into the jeep. "Johnny, go hide again," the smallest child kept saying. "So we can find him in that place where the light is. Johnny go hide - - -"

"Shhh, Teresa," her father answered, indulgently. "No more game until we get back to America." He thought longingly of that land across the sea that to them was home. "Besides it is too hard to find you on the other side, and reintegrate a body for you—"

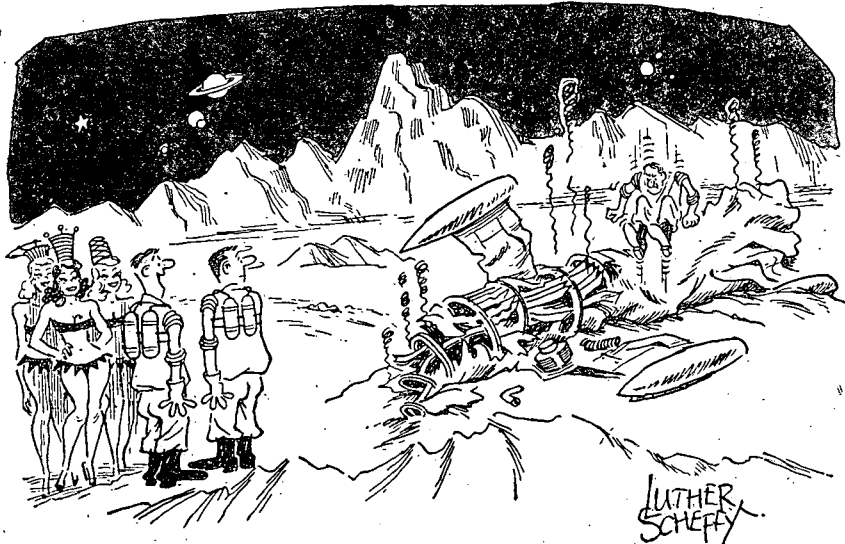
"John," the woman spoke reprovingly. "Why explain it to them? You know they can't under-

stand what you're talking about."

Holder grinned and was silent. Sometimes he wondered if he understood it all himself. All he knew was that a body could be disintegrated, by pure mental force.

The jeep shifted into high gear. At the end of this journey, a plane would be waiting. This would take them to America.... Home.... There a whole new world of exploration waited for him. The very best research teams the country possessed would be at his disposal, the keenest brains, the sharpest minds. Hugging the kids to him, he smiled quietly to himself.

THE END



"He doesn't care about the ship. He's just sore because it took so long to get here."

The Mannion-Court-Martial

by

Randall Garrett

Why would a Space Officer lead an android rebellion? Even Lieut. Mannion believed he was guilty as they gave him the supreme penalty . . .

LIEUT. DAN MANNION of the Earth Space Patrol stood in the prisoner's dock in the courtroom, gripping the rail of his cubicle so hard his fingers hurt.

Comdr. Edward Harkness of the SP, who was presiding, glared at him sternly. "Lieutenant Mannion, the charges against you are severe. You face the risk of total mnemonic erasure if found guilty. Is there anything you care to say in your own defense before we proceed with the trial?"

Mannion glanced around the military courtroom, seeing the pale, tense, anxious face of his wife Virginia, the stern countenance of Dubrow, his former commanding officer, the interested eyes of half a hundred onlookers.

"No," he said. His voice was thin and dry. "There's nothing I can say. Nothing at all."

He saw Virginia's pleading eyes.

She was telling him silently, *Please, Dan. Tell them you're innocent. At least put up a defense!*

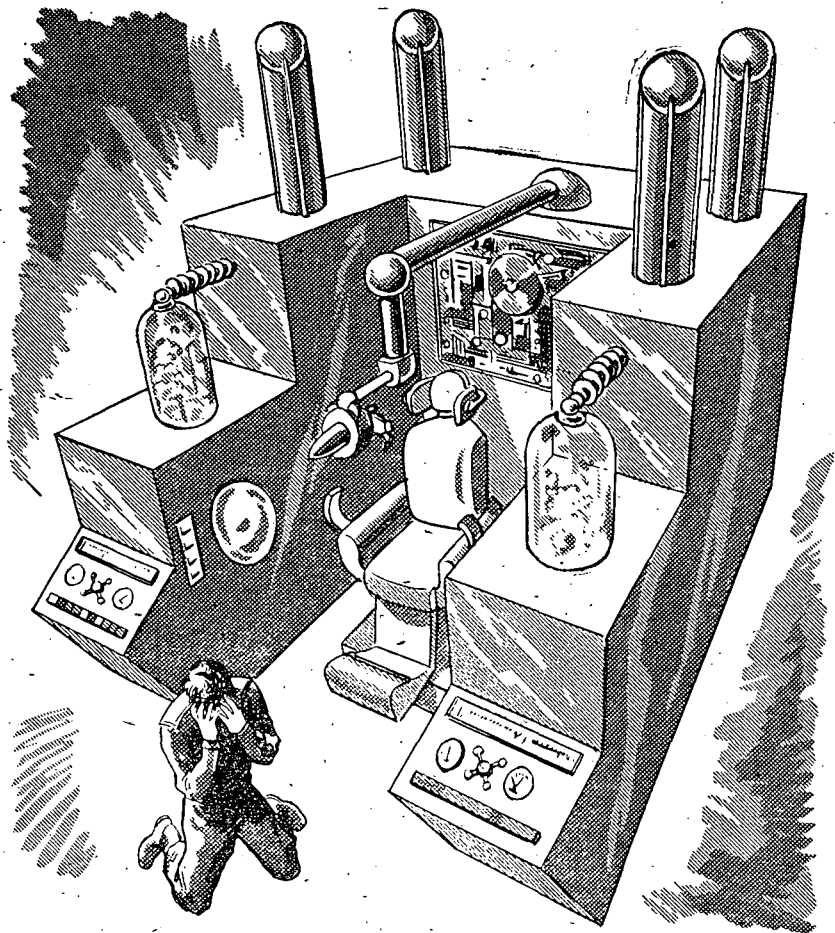
"Call the witness," Commander Harkness ordered.

"Base Commandant Lee Dubrow will please take the witness stand."

While Dubrow was being sworn in, Mannion studied him. His former commander on the Iapetus base was a tall, icy-faced man with close-cropped gray hair and a stiff military mustache. Mannion had never been particularly friendly with his commanding officer.

"Commander Dubrow, will you relate the events leading up to Lieutenant Mannion's actions in the Android Rebellion?"

Dubrow cleared his throat. "Very well. As you know, the Space Patrol established its base on Iapetus last year — no, two years ago, at the end of 2365 — as part of its program of preparing Saturn's



moons for colonization.”

“How many members of the patrol were with you?”

“Fifteen, altogether. I was in command, naturally, and for most of the period we were there Lieutenant Mannion was my second - in -

command.”

“Isn’t it fairly unusual for a Lieutenant to hold such a high position?” the prosecutor asked.

“Major Dunphy was killed by a rebellious android seven weeks after we arrived,” Dubrow said.

"Lieutenant Mannion was the next highest ranking officer in my squadron and he took over."

"How many androids did you have with you?"

"Over a hundred," said Dubrow. "It was quite a time we had when they mutinied."

"Had you any knowledge of the mutiny beforehand?"

"No."

"Did any member of your staff know about the mutiny before it took place?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"Lieutenant Mannion. He was in conspiracy with VZ-1972, the ring-leader of the mutiny."

MANNION FELT HIS FACE go bright red. He wanted to stand up and shout, "That's a lie! I never knew anything about the mutiny!"

But he couldn't. Somewhere in the back of his mind lay a shadow of doubt. He could not remember anything that had happened at the time of the mutiny — and perhaps he had — perhaps —

The judge said, "Tell us about Lieutenant Mannion's part in the mutiny."

"Yes, sir. The first we knew about it was on the morning of November 9, 2366, when the androids we used to keep the atmos-

phere - generators running refused to perform their regular tasks. I ordered Lieutenant Mannion to go outside and discover what the trouble was. He refused. I ordered him a second time, and he struck me and threw open the airlock. All of the androids rushed in."

"What happened then?"

"I found myself wrestling with Lieutenant Mannion while the androids destroyed all of the Project's equipment and apparatus. In the struggle all 12 of my men were killed by the androids. Finally I succeeded in subduing Lieutenant Mannion and bringing the androids back under control —"

"How was that done?"

"The androids respond automatically to a direct command from the superior officer, no matter what they're doing. Had I been free to give that command the mutiny would never have taken place. But Lieutenant Mannion prevented me from giving the command until it was too late. All of our men were dead and the Project set back more than a year. I placed Lieutenant Mannion under detention, put the androids in permafreeze, and returned to Earth. And here I am."

"Is that the extent of your testimony?"

"It is."

"You may step down, then. Lieu-

tenant Mannion?"

Mannion rose and faced the judge. "Sir?"

"You've now heard your commander testify that you wilfully obstructed his attempt to end the android mutiny a mutiny which cost 12 human lives and did over \$5,000,000 worth of damage to the Iapetus Project. Is there, again, anything you care to say in your own defense?"

Mannion shook his head. "No, sir."

"Very well, then: The court will adjourn for 15 minutes while data is programmed and fed to the computer, after which the verdict will be announced and the sentence read."

MANNION LEFT THE stand and felt his wife Virginia come up to him and hold him tightly.

"Dan, Dan, why don't you say something? Dubrow's testimony is damning if you don't speak up!"

Mannion frowned. "But I don't remember, Virginia! My mind is a blank for the entire period of the mutiny! For all I know I did do as the Commander says!"

"Impossible, Dan! You were always so loyal to the Patrol —"

"I still am," he said. "And if I committed this crime I deserve to be punished for it."

"Do you know what the punishment is?"

"Mnemonic erasure," Mannion said.

"No! Do you know what mnemonic erasure *means*? They'll strip away all your memories, everything but the basic pattern of your reflexes and reactions. Everything that is Dan Mannion will be erased, discarded, thrown away." Tears appeared in the corners of her eyes. "I'll be declared a widow, officially. And your body will be given a new name, a different identity. You'll be re-educated as someone else."

Mannion nodded bleakly. "I know. What can I do? Dubrow's my Commander; he *has* to be telling the truth. I don't remember anything. Perhaps I went temporarily out of my mind, did an insane thing, and now my consciousness has blanked out that period. It doesn't matter. I killed 12 men by my actions, Ginny."

"No! No!"

"I'm afraid so," Mannion said. "And I'll take my punishment for it now."

He turned away, not wanting to see his wife's tearstreaked face. A torrent of conflicting emotions raged within him despite the calm exterior he maintained. All his life he had dreamed of the Patrol and its glory; he had worked toward

that one end. Four years at the Academy, two more in apprenticeship, then finally the commission and the assignment to Iapetus.

And what happened? A moment of insanity, perhaps — or downright conspiracy with an android to overthrow the Project by violence? He didn't know. He would never know. All he knew was he had done some mad act and now he would pay for it. His marriage, his career, even his identity itself, would be taken from him.

An orderly touched his arm. "The court's returning to order, Lieutenant Mannion. Please resume your place."

"Sure. Sure, I'm going." He kissed his wife tenderly and started up the row of steps to take his place in the prisoner's dock.

COMMANDER HARKNESS was staring grimly at him. The verdict, when it came, would be no surprise; from the nature of Mannion's lack of defense, it would be a foregone certainty.

"Lieutenant Mannion, you're aware of the nature of the crime you're charged with?"

"Yes, sir."

"The only witness against you has been your former Commander, Lee Dubrow. You have not made any statements in your own defense."

"No, sir."

"In view of this situation, the court has no recourse but, to find you guilty of insubordination in the highest degree, conspiracy, malicious attack upon an officer with intent to aid in mutiny."

Mannion bowed his head. "Yes, sir," he said in a half-audible tone.

"The punishment for these crimes is necessarily severe," the judge went on. "Naturally, we're unable to put into effect what would normally have been the penalty 300 years ago. The death penalty is obsolete. However, I hereby pronounce a sentence amounting to execution upon the personality, mind, and accumulated memories of the man formerly known as Daniel Mannion."

"You mean mnemonic erasure, sir?"

"Obviously. This sentence automatically carries with it loss of all privileges, pensions, and honors that go with your high rank in the Space Patrol. Your name will be wiped from its roster. After the erasure, you will never have existed, Lieutenant Mannion. Your body will be restrained under a new name and will make a fresh start in life. It will even be possible for your new personality to enter the Space Patrol, if it so chooses. No prejudice against your body will be entertained for your mind's previous

acts."

In the background, Mannion heard his wife's faint sobbing. "I hear and accept the sentence, sir," he said quietly.

"The act of erasure will be carried out immediately, in the Space Patrol's mnemonic laboratories on the 14th level of this building." The gavel rapped three times. "The case of Earth versus Daniel Mannion is hereby considered closed."

"No!" Virginia suddenly shouted. All eyes in the courtroom swiveled to focus on her as she rose from the audience to protest. "No, don't close the case yet!"

"This is highly irregular," said Judge Harkness. "Do you have additional testimony, Mrs. Mannion?"

"Not — testimony, your honor. But can't you see that Dan's obviously insane? He's allowing himself to be sentenced without even a protest! Can't he enter a plea of insanity?"

"The plea of insanity would not alter the judgment in any way," Mrs. Mannion. Rest assured that your husband's — ah — disturbed mental state has been taken into account in the decision. Whether he was insane or criminally possessed at the time of the mutiny makes no difference; the crime has been committed, obviously, and the guilty person is of no further

value to society. Mnemonic erasure is not merely a punishment, Mrs. Mannion. It's the gateway to rehabilitation for a sick person."

"I — see. May I say goodbye to my husband before you — erase him?"

GOING DOWN IN THE LIFT tube from the courtroom on the 60th floor of Patrol headquarters to the lab on Level Fourteen, Mannion felt strangely numb inside.

Two Patrol members stood behind him, ready to go for blasters if he made the slightest move toward escaping. But Mannion had no idea of escaping.

He was on his way to be erased.

He wondered what erasure was like. Did it hurt? Did you feel the pain as they stripped away layer after layer of your memory like peelings from an onion? First 2367 would go, but the new year was only two weeks old and he'd spent those two weeks in prison. Then 2366 would vanish — but 2366 was partly gone, at least for the few hours of the Mutiny. Next would go 2365, the year they first landed on Iapetus.

And so, ever backward, they would tear away more and more of the accumulation of memories and experiences that was Dan Mannion. 2364, 2363.

2362. That was the year he met Virginia. They would take away his courtship, his wedding, those wonderful early days of marriage —

The two years as a Patrol Apprentice would go. The four years at the Academy.

Adolescence. Boyhood. Childhood.

Soon there would be nothing left of Dan Mannion but a few vague memories of babyhood, and then even those would be gone. He would emerge from the lab wiped blank, a fresh unmarked slate ready to be given its new identity.

Suddenly, he found himself quivering.

I'm not guilty! I didn't do it! I couldn't have done it!

Too late, a voice said. He saw again the faces of Virginia, of Commander Harkness, of stern-faced Dubrow giving the testimony that damned him.

Too late. Too late to defend yourself.

"Fourteen," the robo-brain of the elevator announced. The door slid back. Mannion felt light pressure behind each of his arms as his two guards shoved him gently forward.

A frosted glass door loomed up ahead of him. The sign on the door read *Mnemonics Laboratory*.

Cold sweat drenched his body.

Now that he was but feet away from the room where the erasure would take place, he wanted out desperately, wanted some chance to prove that he hadn't conspired with the androids, hadn't aided in the revolt, hadn't helped to murder 12 fellow Patrolmen and wreck the Iapetus project.

"You go in here," someone said to him.

The door marked *Mnemonics Laboratory* was swinging open to receive him.

There was no way out.

FOUR GRAY - SMOCKED technicians waited inside for him. One of the guards with him said, "This is Mannion. He was just sentenced upstairs."

"I know. The order came down the pneumotubes a minute ago. Total erasure."

"That's right," the guard said. "He gets wiped clean."

"Will you lead him to the machines, please?"

Dan went forward and faced a complex angle of probes and dials. "Is this the machine that does it?" he asked uneasily.

"That's right. It'll be over in a minute, Lieutenant Mannion. We clamp the electrodes to your scalp and run preliminary tests with an electroencephalograph — and then we use the Eraser."

"Will it be painful?"

"It'll be quick. There won't be anything more than a faint tickling sensation, and then —"

"Then Dan Mannion ceases to exist." He stared appealingly at the technician in charge and said, "Listen — does the sentence have to be carried out at once?"

"The order says immediately. We have the machine all ready for you."

Dan felt perspiration trickling down his body. "Can you wait a few minutes? There's something I'd like you to do for me?"

"What's that?"

"Probe my mind. I'm suffering from amnesia — a short - range blockage of the critical era around the time the android mutiny took place. Couldn't you —?"

"Impossible. Not without a court order, at any rate. And the trial's over."

Dan scowled. "But my life depends on it! My identity is going to be taken away. The least you could have done was look!"

"Come on, Mannion," one of the guards growled. "The time to make your pitch is during the trial, not after the sentence has been pronounced." Dan felt himself shoved forward.

The machine loomed up before him — gigantic, monstrous, a mindless instrument of horror. Within

minutes he was going to undergo mnemonic erasure, to have his mind blanked, his identity removed —

For a crime I didn't commit!

Suddenly he felt sure of his innocence. Despite the evidence, despite the testimony, he knew in his heart that he was innocent.

It was a frameup of some sort. It had to be.

He allowed himself to be led up to the machine. But abruptly, as they were unhinging some apparatus to strap to his head, he spun away from the guards who held him lightly, dove, grabbed at a blaster that protruded from a black leather holster —

"Okay," he said. "Get against that wall, all of you. One move I don't like and I'll destroy the whole lab."

HIS FINGERS WERE SHAKING with inner tension. All his life he had been raised to obey authority, to accept the commands of his superior officers —

And now he was rebelling. He was threatening the destruction of one of Earth's most expensive pieces of equipment.

The threat worked. The four technicians and the two guards backed against the wall.

"What do you want?" the head technician asked.

"I told you before. I want you

to probe my mind, to look into that period that's a blank for me. If you find that I'm guilty, I'll — I'll submit to the erasure. If not, I'll demand a new trial. But I won't allow myself to be wiped out without at least a look!"

"All right. We'll probe you," said the technician. "You'll have to be under anesthetic, of course."

"How can I trust you? How do I know you won't put me through mnemonic erasure the moment I submit to being anesthetized?"

The technician had no answer. "I'll tell you," Mannion said. "You're all doctors, aren't you? All four?"

They nodded.

"All right, then. I'll rely on your oaths as medical men not to put me through erasure until you've probed that mutiny fully. Well?"

"Okay, Mannion. We'll take a look. But if it's not as you say —"

"I'll take my chances," Mannion said. He felt cold and uncertain inside. He didn't know what they'd find. He didn't even know whether they'd keep their word and probe him before the erasure.

He put the gun down on a lab table. "Here," he said. "Here's my gun. Now let's see how good your oath is."

The only trouble with that was, he might never see how good it was.

"JUST RELAX," the technician said. "The probe is entering your mind, now. Just relax . . ."

Mannion sank downward into the soft, warm darkness that enfolded him. He was moving back into his own past now, gently guided along by the mind - probe —

WHAM!

It was like walking full -tilt into a mountainside. Some obstruction in his mind, no doubt.

But the probe bored its way through, drilled through the hard barrier of amnesia in his mind.

And suddenly he was back on Iapetus, in Project Headquarters.

He was saying, "Commander Dubrow, the androids running the atmosphere - generators are lying down on the job. They don't seem to be working."

Dubrow glared at him coldly. "Stick to your own job, Lieutenant Mannion. Coleridge is supervising the androids out there."

"No, he isn't! Coleridge isn't there."

"He must be there, Lieutenant."

"Commander, I'm going out there to see what's wrong. Those androids have been acting up strangely all day and I don't like it."

"I order you to stay here!" Dubrow snapped.

"But —"

Hesitantly Mannion took a few steps toward the airlock. The an-

droids outside were sauntering casually around like unemployed thieves. It wasn't a natural way for androids to behave.

"Sir, I request special permission to go out there and investigate, sir!"

Dubrow was throwing open the airlock — and the androids came rushing in!

He's crazy, Lieutenant Mannion thought. I've got to take charge — keep those androids from wrecking the Project —

"Get away from there, sir! Close the lock!"

"Don't give me orders, Mannion!"

Dan shook his head and started to run toward his superior officer. But suddenly Dubrow charged him.

The abrupt assault bowled him over. Dan ducked and tried to land a punch but Dubrow had his blaster out. A blow crashed into Mannion's forehead. He tried to clear away the cobwebs but Dubrow hit him again and all went dim.

He had a vague memory of Dubrow's directing the androids in a methodical destruction of the Project. Then it was all over and the androids were back where they belonged. Dubrow was holding a hypno-mech in front of his eyes, spinning around and around, a dizzying sleep — inducing confusing

blare of many colors, around and around, around and around . . .

And then he was asleep.

"WE OWE YOU a great apology, Lieutenant Mannion," the technician was saying. "If you hadn't forced us to probe your mind we would have sent an innocent man to mnemonic erasure. But now we have the record of what actually happened —"

"Hang on to it," Mannion said. "I've got to get upstairs and find Dubrow before he gets out of here."

Without waiting for a word of protest, Dan threw off the mind-probe apparatus, jumped off the table, and raced out into the hall.

He caught the lift tube going up. In all likelihood Dubrow, Virginia, and the judge would still be in the courtroom, working out some settlement of the former Lieutenant Mannion's private-property.

He was right.

"Mannion! What are you doing —"

Dan ignored the judge's outcry. "Hello, Dubrow. I just had some of my amnesia removed. That was a pretty clever story you told, wasn't it?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, Mannion."

"The hell you don't! You don't know anything about the hypno-mech you used to block my mind

and —”

Dan ducked suddenly as a spurt of energy from the protogun in Dubrow's hand seared through the wall behind him. Dubrow was aiming the gun, readying to fire again —

And Judge Harkness rose from the bench and hurled a heavy law-book at him.

It struck Dubrow squarely on the side of the head; the bolt of proton - force squirted toward the ceiling and Dan leaped forward.

He crashed into Dubrow and knocked the tall officer sprawling; the proton - gun clattered to the floor. Dubrow squirmed and kicked but Dan's fists thundered against his body.

“Hypnotize me, will you? And try to frame me for that mutiny? I'll —”

“All right, Mannion,” a calm voice said from somewhere above him. “You can get off him now. He's out cold.”

JUDGE HARKNESS FACED Dan and Virginia Mannion. “I don't understand why you didn't speak up, son.”

“I — I assumed I was wrong, sir. I've always been trained to respect the word of an officer. If Commander Dubrow said I was

guilty and I didn't remember — well, sir, he had to be right!”

Harkness chuckled. “You know differently now. We've had a mind-probe run on Dubrow. It seems he was bribed by a group of private contractors to wreck the Patrol's project on Iapetus so they could get the job instead. He figured he'd have you tried for the crime, leaving him in the clear. So all he did was switch the action around and then hypnotize you into forgetting it.”

“What's going to happen to him now?” Mannion asked.

“What else? He's being erased now. Commander Dubrow no longer exists.”

Mannion shuddered. He remembered vividly that complex pile of machinery on the 14th Level.

“I guess I'm free, then,” he said.

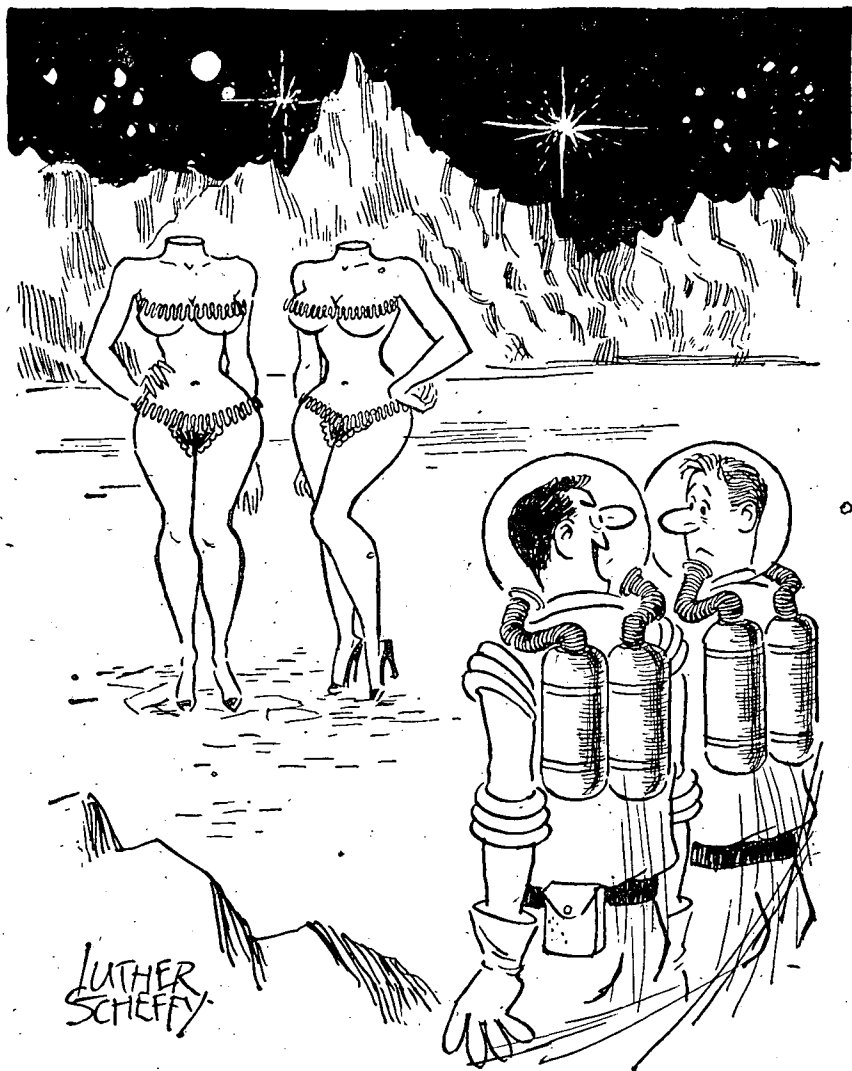
Harkness nodded. “I guess you are, young man. And next time don't be so ready to believe your own guilt.”

“No, sir! I mean — yes, sir! I mean —”

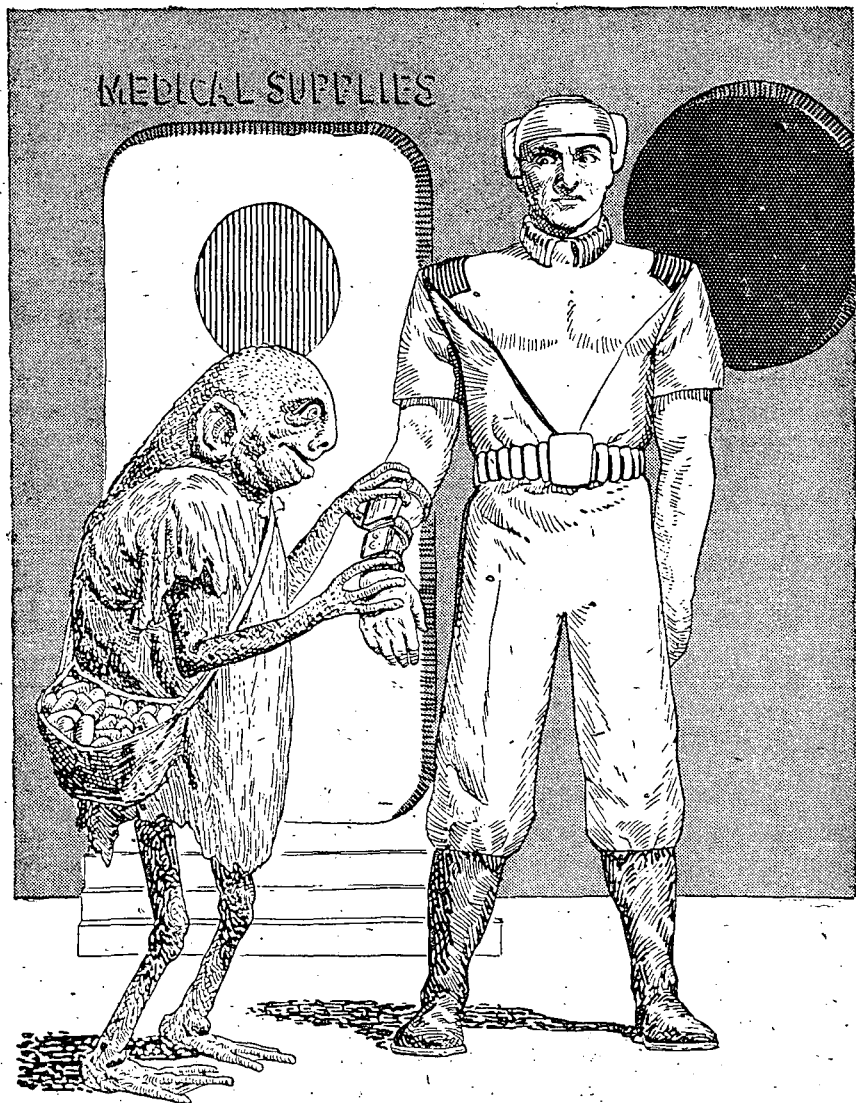
It didn't matter. Mannion smiled at Harkness and took his wife in his arms. The case was closed and he was a free man and an officer in the Space Patrol.

And he was still Dan Mannion.

THE END



"Oh, don't be so technical."



Overlord Of Colony Eight

by

Robert Silverberg

Reese returned to the colony expecting a pleasant reunion; instead he found friends ready to hunt him down like an alien beast . . .

COLONY EIGHT on the *Damballa* was a huddle of low plastic domes set in a clearing of the jungle. It was also the most welcome sight Jim Reese had seen in a month—the month since he'd quarreled with Lois and struck out into the jungle alone.

He had covered close to a thousand miles—all the way to Colony Seven, the nearest of the 10 colonies Earth had planted on the jungle world. Now he was returning, hoping his month's absence had healed the wounds he and Lois had caused each other. She had had time to think things over. So had he—and he still loved her.

He saw one of the natives straggling through the jungle toward him and grinned. It was drunken old Kuhli, a native who had been accidentally made a drug addict by a well-meaning Terran doctor. Kuhli lived in a murky fog and hung around Colony Eight because

he had no place else to go.

Reese was happy to see a familiar face, even Kuhli's. He hailed the alien.

"Kuhli! Kuhli, you old devil! Where are you going?" He knew the native rarely ventured into the jungle any more; his delicate sense of direction had long since been blunted by drugs.

The alien whirled uncertainly and fixed his bleary green eyes on Reese. "Trouble, Earthman," he wheezed. "Go away. Away. Big trouble."

Reese frowned. "What are you talking about?"

Kuhli came near, and rocked unsteadily on the pads of his seven-toed feet. "Everyone crazy there. Not safe. Trouble, Earthman." He moaned softly to himself. "Sad things happening."

Reese glared at the alien, grasped him by his scaly shoulders and shook him. "Speak up, Kuhli! Is

this just another pipedream of yours or is there something wrong in the Colony? I have to know!"

The alien whined piteously. "Don't hurt Kuhli. Don't hurt. Trouble, Earthman!"

Reese noticed a pack slung over the creature's back. "What's in here?"

"Mine! Mine! Don't touch!"

Curiosity impelled Reese to turn the alien around and peer in the bulging pack while the old man gibbered in fear.

Reese whistled. The pack was brim-full of ampoules of benzolurethrimine, the pain-killing drug to which Kuhli had been made an addict. The alien had stumbled into the colony one day, his chest slashed open by the talons of a *khaljek*-bird; the colony doctor had administered the drug to ease his agony and only then discovered benzolurethrimine was a powerful narcotic for the aliens.

"Where'd you get all this stuff?"

Reese demanded.

"Took it. Needed it. Not going back to Colony any more."

There was something doing there, all right. This was no pipedream of Kuhli's—not when he was willing to steal a supply of drugs and strike out on his own into the treacherous jungle. Reese tightened his lips and, started to run toward the nearby colony at a dead trot. He hoped Lois was

all right; he'd never forgive himself for leaving her if anything had happened to her.

HE ENTERED THE CIRCLE of domes. No one seemed to be around. That was peculiar. There should always be a few idling colonists resting up before continuing their task of clearing the jungles.

Finally he spotted Lloйд Kramer, one of his best friends. He and Kramer had decided together to join and had come out to *Damballa* on the same ship.

"Lloyd! Lloyd!" Reese ran toward the big man, who was standing stiffly outside his hut, staring elsewhere. "Hey, Lloyd!"

Kramer turned. Reese said, "I just saw old Kuhli heading through the forest with a packload of benzo. He says there's some trouble in the Colony. What's up? How's Lois? Is she all right?"

A puzzled frown appeared on Kramer's face. "Who are you?" he said in a deep rumbling, voice. "I do not recognize you."

"What? You crazy, Lloyd? I'm Jim Reese!"

"Jim. . . Reese?" Kramer repeated the words as if they were some totally alien name. "Where did you come from, Jim Reese?"

"I—what the devil is this, Lloyd?" Reese backed away suspiciously. "What's happened to you? Where is everyone?"

"You do not know," Kramer said. "Therefore you were not here when the conversion took place. Therefore I must capture you."

He lunged.

Reese got out of the way just as Kramer's six-four body came thundering toward him. He had known Lloyd long enough to be aware of the big man's fight-patterns; he could side-step easily enough.

"Lloyd! You out of your head?"

"You must be captured," Kramer repeated. He turned and swung his giant fists. Reese managed to parry one blow but a massive right crashed into his belly and knocked him gasping back against the thick bole of a *ghive* tree. He clung to the sticky bark for a second, sucking in breath. Then, as Kramer advanced again, Reese yanked out his hunting-knife. Kramer was unarmed.

"Lloyd, I don't know what's gotten into you but if you take another step closer to me I'm going to slice you up. You must be crazy!"

Kramer drew back, staring in puzzlement at the gleaming saw-toothed blade in Reese's hand. He froze some three yards away.

He said aloud, "What should I do, Dr. Tersen? He has a knife."

And in a cold, unfamiliar voice, he answered himself: "Keep him there at all costs—your life, if nec-

essary. I will send help."

"Yes, Dr. Tersen," Kramer said in his own voice.

Reese frowned. Tersen? He remembered someone of that name—some scientist involved in a scandal a few years back on Earth. But what he was doing here on *Damballa* and what sort of control was he exerting over Lloyd Kramer?

"I am to keep you from escaping," Kramer said flatly. "Put the knife away, Jim Reese."

Reese glanced past Kramer and saw moving figures—colonists, coming toward him. He recognized them but still there was something unfamiliar about them. They moved stiffly. *Like so many zombies*, Reese thought.

Sweat poured down his body. He didn't want to hurt Kramer, not even the strangely-possessed Kramer before him.

Stooping quickly, he picked up a handful of the soft, warm *Damballa* mud and hurled it into Kramer's face. The big man, blinded, spat out mouthfuls of mud. Reese turned and ran.

"After him!" Kramer rumbled. "He's getting away!"

Reese heard a dozen pairs of feet behind him. He dodged back into the jungle, felt a slimy trailer of vine slap across his face and plunged into a swampy morass covered over with quivering *chulla*-ferns.

HE CROUCHED THERE for five minutes, ten, listening while the colonists thrashed about searching for him. He felt chilled despite the tropical warmth of the forest.

Who was this Tersen? And what had he done to the people of Colony Eight? To Lois. . . ?

He had to find out. Somehow, while he had been gone, Tersen had seized control of the minds and bodies of his friends and fellow colonists. He heard their voices—steely, unreal.

"Any sign of him?"

"No. He has vanished."

"Dr. Tersen will punish us. We must find him."

"He has a knife. We must be careful."

"No. Dr. Tersen said to capture him even at the cost of our lives."

Reese shuddered. He recognized those voices, or thought he did. Abel Lester, Dick Fredrics, Chuck Hylan—men he had worked with and known for years. Hunting him now, as if he were some wild *thruuv* needed to serve as food for the colony.

Someone passed within three feet of his hiding place and moved on. Reese was bathed in his own sweat. If he could only stay hidden until they went away, then sneak back into the Colony and find out what had happened, find out if Lois was all right—

A needle of pain shot up his leg. He gasped and tried to keep from screaming.

Another bright bolt of agony. Another.

Needleworms! Boring up from the mucky depths of the swamp and penetrating the soles of his boots!

He cursed. The damnable creatures were everywhere. He went into a little dance, trying to avoid their keen snouts, but there were dozens of them, sensing a juicy meal. If he stayed here any longer he'd be slowly eaten to death.

Clutching his knife tightly he edged out of his shelter, looking around. There was no one in sight; the searchers were beating through the underbrush up ahead.

He moved on tiptoe back toward the village. And suddenly the thick corded arms of Lloyd Kramer shot around him from behind, pinioning him in an unbreakable grip. The knife dropped from his hands.

"All right!" Kramer called. "I've got him! Let's go back now."

THREE MEN GUARDED him as he lay bound in one corner of the Colony Administration Building. Lloyd Kramer, Abel Lester and Mark Cameron, Lois' father. They had been facing him wordlessly for almost 15 minutes. None of them would answer his questions—not even when he asked Cameron whether Lois was all right.

Suddenly the door opened and a tall, ascetically thin man entered. Reese knew instantly from the cold set of his features and the fact that his eyes, unlike those of the zombies, burnt with a hard flame of intelligence, that this was Dr. Tersen.

"You can go," Tersen said.

The three guards nodded and left. Reese noticed that a tiny band of bright metal encircled Tersen's forehead.

The scientist looked down at Reese. "Are you a member of this colony?" he asked.

"Why should I tell you?"

"I repeat, James Reese: are you a member of this colony?"

"Yes," Reese said. "I've been away on a hunting trip the past month. Who the devil are you?"

"My name is John Tersen, formerly of Earth. You may have heard of me."

"I remember some sort of trial," Reese said. "You were accused of illegal experiments of some kind. You were banished from Earth."

"Ah, yes. Precisely." A film of pain crossed Tersen's lean features. "Exiled from my native world. That was six years ago—six years in which I've worked alone, on an uncharted planetoid, preparing. Colony Eight of Damballa represents my first laboratory experiment. After that, the other nine colonies—and then, Earth. I'll have repaid

them for what they did to me!"

"Do you have this whole colony in your control?" Reese asked.

"Yes. All but you—and you'll soon be under the beam too."

That means Lois too, Reese thought. *What an idiot I was to go away and leave her here alone!*

And then he realized it was lucky he had done so. If he had stayed here, he'd probably be a zombie like all the rest. At least this way he was a free agent and it was still possible to defeat Tersen—for the time being.

Something flashed brightly in Tersen's hand. A thin metallic bracelet—of the same metal as the band around the scientist's forehead.

"This is for you," Tersen said. "Since I can't readjust the generator without losing control of all the others I've prepared a special trinket for you. Let me slip it on you, Reese."

Tersen reached for Reese's wrist. Reese twisted his body away.

"Don't be coy," Tersen said, smiling bleakly. He slapped Reese and seized his wrist. Despite Reese's desperate writhing Tersen managed to force the bracelet over the man's wrist and clamp it shut.

"There," Tersen said. "Now the whole village is under control."

Reese was puzzled. He felt no different; evidently something had

gone wrong. But he did not intend to let Tersen know that.

"We'll march on Colony Seven tonight," Tersen mused aloud. "Everything's ready to begin the conquest."

He stepped behind Reese and undid his bonds. Reese rose to his feet stiffly, hoping he made a convincing zombie. He crossed the room toward the door.

"Join the others," Tersen ordered.

"Yes, Dr. Tersen," Reese said in sepulchral tones.

OUTSIDE, HE GLANCED AROUND and saw several colonists some distance away. He walked toward them, careful to maintain the stiff walk in case Tersen were watching.

Something had gone wrong with Tersen's bracelet because Reese definitely was under no control. It was a lucky break; it allowed him some extra time to discover what power Tersen held over the enslaved colonists. And he could find Lois.

The bracelet on his wrist gave no clue. It was just a thin band of metal without ornament. Presumably Tersen had expected to exert some kind of thought-control through it.

None of the colonists wore bracelets of this sort. Therefore, Tersen had some other means of

controlling them. He had spoken of a "generator." Perhaps he could find that while he remained at large.

"Hello, Earthman. There is trouble here."

Maintaining his stiffness, Reese turned. He saw Khuli, the addict. The pack he had been carrying was missing.

"Why are you back?" Reese asked.

"I need...I need..." Kuhli gestured to his back. "I lost my pack. I need..." He could not pronounce the name of the drug he craved but he had been drawn back to the colony by desperate need.

Reese began to say something—then he cut it short and started to run.

"Lois! Lois!"

The girl was walking across the clearing in the familiar stiff-legged stride. Reese caught up with her in a moment or two, his heart pounding. "Thank God you're all right!" he exclaimed.

She stared at him. Her lovely face was void of all expression and her hazel-grey eyes looked blankly at him. "Who are you?" she asked, as if she were sleepwalking.

"Why—I'm Jim! Are you under this dreadful thing, too? Yes, yes, of course you must be. I..."

She interrupted him—speaking in a deep, grotesque voice that

sounded more like Dr. Tersen's than her own. "Somehow this Reese is not under control. He must be captured and put out of the way. get him!"

Reese realized that Tersen had been watching through Lois' eyes. Half a dozen of the colonists were converging on him now. He turned and started to run.

They spread out in a loose ring around him and he saw that unless he could dodge past them and escape into the forest, he was trapped.

He dashed forward toward the nearest man—Chuck Hylan. Hylan was lean and agile but Tersen's control left him stiff and awkward. He brought his fists up and aimed a few wild punches at Reese. Reese ducked them easily and smashed a hard right at Hylan.

It was a blow that could have toppled a tree—but Hylan merely staggered and stayed up. Reese saw that the control gave them extra endurance. He'd get nowhere by fighting with them. Pushing Hylan aside, Reese broke for the clearing.

And froze.

He heard Tersen's dry voice saying, "... must have been a short in the wave canal. But that's taken care of now."

The voice was not loud. It was in his mind.

And he was unable to move.

IT WAS A STRANGE, unearthly experience to be a zombie. Part of Reese's mind remained conscious. Part of him knew that Tersen had belatedly achieved control through the bracelet on his wrist and that Reese was no longer his body's master. He felt a presence in his mind. Tersen. Tersen dictated his motions now.

Stiffleggedly — and it was no sham, now — he turned or *was* turned, and walked back toward the rest of the group. Tersen had appeared and stood there, icy eyes glittering at him.

"I made the mistake of not testing you before I freed you," the scientist said. "But I think the control is in effect now. We'll see."

Raise your right hand! came a sudden mental command. Reese felt his right hand shoot above his head. He struggled to pull it down but it was impossible.

Left hand!

Both hands!

Kneel on your left knee!

Apparently Tersen was satisfied. He ordered Reese up and turned away. His control was complete.

"We march on Colony Seven-tonight," Tersen announced again.

The rest of that day was a dim blur for Jim Reese. He followed through a series of dictated tasks, preparing for the raid on the colony. He discovered now exactly what had happened to Colony Eight

but there was nothing at all he could do about it.

Tersen had appeared about a week after Reese had quarrelled with Lois. He had announced he was here to perform some experiments and asked the Colony to let him stay for a month or so. The Colony had agreed.

Tersen had proceeded to set up a dome and build his generator. It operated on encephalographic principles and allowed him to control the brains of all within its field at the time it was turned on. The Colony had not discovered this until the day Tersen had switched the generator on. From then on all were slaves.

Since Reese had not been present when that happened he was not subject to the generator field nor was the generator set up to control him. Tersen had had a portable generator under experimental construction and it was that which he had used to control Reese. It had failed, at first, though Reese's clever act had deceived Tersen. But when the scientist discovered Reese still was not under control he was able to make a trifling adjustment that altered the situation.

These things Reese found out by his contact with Tersen's mind. Contact worked in two directions — but control in only one.

Reese and the others readied the Colony for the attack on its neigh-

bors. Tersen planned to control all the 10 colonies on *Damballa* — and then, building more generators, he would spread his dominion to Earth, the planet that had driven him into exile.

BUT ONE PERSON in Colony Eight was free from Tersen's control. One person came and went as he pleased.

Kuhli. The drug - sodden alien.

Reese was standing stiffly before the medical commissary later that day when Kuhli came out, his back once again laden with a packful of benzolurethrimine ampoules. The alien was smiling happily in his narcotic daze.

He approached Reese and peered at him curiously out of eyes clouded with drugs. "Earthman. Much trouble here. I leave again."

Prisoner within his own skull, Reese longed to break Tersen's iron control. But it was impossible. He stood stock - still while Kuhli stared at him.

The alien's blubbery mouth split in a pleased smile. "Pretty," he crooned. "Pretty. I take."

Reese's heart bounded in sudden hope.

Kuhli's dim eyes were fixed on the shining bracelet on Reese's wrist!

The alien was pawing his arm now, examining the trinket, exclaiming little wordless cries of pleasure

over it. Reese felt his body breaking out in heavy sweat. If only Tersen wouldn't notice —!

Kuhli began to slip the bracelet off.

And Tersen detected it. His sudden, urgent thought came to Reese: *Stop him! Don't let him remove the bracelet, Reese!*

Unable to resist, Reese started to draw his hand back, to bring his other fist down on the alien's skull. But halfway through the action he felt a shock like a heavy-voltage current ripping through him and knew that he was free. The alien had removed the bracelet!

Quickly Reese seized it, grabbing it from the alien's paws. Despite Kuhli's protests, Reese hurled the bracelet as far into the underbrush as he could.

He grinned and patted the blubbery alien on one scaly shoulder. "That's all right, Kuhli. Good boy; Kuhli. When this thing is over remind me to get you a new bracelet."

He began to run, moving with grim determination now. He was free again — and now he knew where Tersen and his generator were located. He didn't intend to fail a third time.

TERSEN HAD SET up his headquarters in one of the small domes near the stream that ran

past the colony. Blaster in hand, Reese ran to the dome.

Someone stood in the door. Not Tersen.

Lois.

"Don't go in there," she said — in her normal voice. "Tersen's in there."

"I know." He stared at her. She didn't have the same zombie-like appearance she had had earlier. "Get out of my way," he told her. "I'm going in."

She put her hand on his arm tenderly. "No Jim. Give me the gun. I've broken out of his control. He doesn't know it yet. Let me go in there — and I'll take him by surprise. He won't expect it when I blast him down."

A grin lit Reese's features. The voice was unmistakably Lois'. "Okay. Great idea, darling. Here."

He handed her his blaster and waited for her to go inside. But instead she levelled the gun at him.

"Lois! What is this — a trap?"

Words came from her mouth in reply — words spoken in a deep, distorted voice. "Well done. Now kill him." It was the voice of Dr. Tersen.

Her finger tightened on the trigger as Reese stood frozen in utter horror. Tersen had used a shrewd ruse — by pretending to have let Lois escape his power he had gotten Reese to surrender his weapon.

But Lois stood facing him without firing. Sweat broke out on her face. She became dead pale.

"Fire!" Tersen urged, speaking through her mouth. "Shoot him!"

"I — I can't," she said hesitantly. "I — love — him."

The gun dropped from her hand. A moment later she fell in a crumpled heap at Reese's feet.

There was no time to examine her. He snatched up the blaster, stepped over her fallen body and burst into the dome.

A purple blast of energy seared the air above him and blew a hole above the door. Instantly Reese dropped.

A compact, whirring pile of machinery confronted him — and, huddling behind an overturned bench, was Tersen aiming a blaster at him. Reese flattened himself against the floor.

Tersen fired and missed. Reese squeezed the stud of his own blaster and ashed part of the table behind which Tersen cowered.

He heard footsteps behind him. The colonists, still under Tersen's domination, were coming to their master's aid.

"You'd better give up," Tersen said. "They'll tear you to pieces."

Reese's only reply was another bolt of energy that ripped away the wall above Tersen's head. Tersen fired again; heat bathed Reese's cheek.

The colonists were practically there now. He could hear them swarming up the path to aid Tersen. He fired again —

Squarely into the generator.

Livid blue flames flickered over the complex machinery for a moment. Tubes melted: connections shorted out. An agonized scream came from Tersen and he charged forward madly, blinded with rage.

Reese didn't need to fire. He simply stepped into Tersen's path and smashed him to the ground with a solid right. Then he turned and pumped his remaining three charges into the burning generator.

A moment later the colonists arrived — but not as Tersen's rescuers, as his executioners. Reese got out of their way as the newly-freed colonists rushed in.

What was left of Tersen wasn't pretty.

"It was awful," Lois sobbed, outside. "I knew what he was planning to do and yet I couldn't help myself. I — — was like a puppet on a string."

"I know what it was like," Reese said. "He had me under control a while too — until poor crazy Kuhli decided he liked the way my bracelet shone. But you did help yourself — you didn't fire!"

"Yes," the girl said weakly. "I struggled — and then somehow I won. I snapped his hold and collapsed. And then — and then —"

Reese smiled. "It's all over now," he said. "Tersen's dead and his machine's smashed. It had one flaw — it couldn't control love."

She looked up at him. "You won't go away any more, will you, Jim?"

"That's a silly question," he said.



This diplomat had to be treated with kid gloves; my orders were clear on that. Trouble was my instructions from Earth didn't cover—

The Ambassador's Pet

by

Alexander Blade

I PICKED UP sealed orders at the Routing Desk of Space Service. They were addressed to Captain Johnny Martin of the spaceship 13-XV-1, which is my name and my ship.

They said:

Proceed to Aldebaran VII at once. You are to pick up an Aldebaranian ambassador and transfer him to Earth for high-level diplomatic talks.

You are to treat him with utmost courtesy. Relations between Earth and Aldebaran VII are in a very delicate state at this time.

The ambassador informs us he plans to bring a pet with him to Earth.

Pets, huh? I snorted a little and folded the orders away in my pocket. Well, I supposed it came in the line of duty. If they ordered me to ferry Aldebaranian pets, I'd ferry Aldebaranian pets. All in a day's work, I told myself.

I stopped off and had a couple of beers before returning to the ship. Meersal, my First Officer, was waiting for me.

"Well? Pick up the orders?"

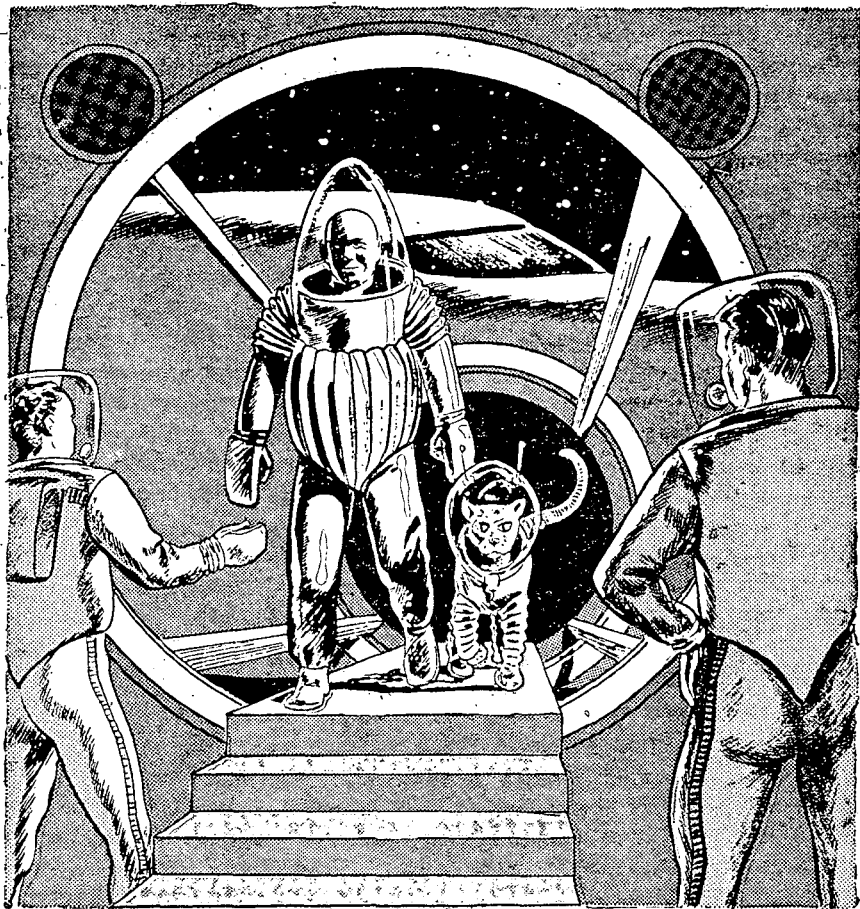
I nodded. "Yep. Got 'em right here." I unfolded them and handed them over to him.

He ran his eyes over them quizzically. "Hokay," he said. "I guess we go to Aldebaran, huh?"

Our instructions came in detail a little while later. We were to hover over Aldebaran VII and give a special signal; a transfer-tug would come up to us from the surface and hand the Ambassador and his pet over to us. Under no conditions were we to land on Aldebaran VII itself; the natives would regard it as a breach of the truce that currently existed between their world and ours.

Okay, I thought. I didn't care.

I gave the orders to the crew at nightfall and we left Earth a little



past midnight. Meersal had already instructed the astrogator about our next destination and he had whipped up the course.

We did some hundred thousand miles on ion-drive and then, safely clear of the Earth's grav-field, con-

verted over and popped into warp. Aldebaran lay three weeks ahead of us through hyperspace.

Earth and Aldebaran had first contact about 10 years before. I didn't know anything particular about the planet or its people—

there are enough worlds in the galaxy so you don't get to know each type of alien there is. We had a special cabin ready aboard the ship for the Aldebaranian ambassador and his pet. Instructions told us to prepare a special fluorine atmosphere, which meant the Aldebaranians couldn't be much like us.

But they had agreed to negotiate a treaty of friendship with Earth and were sending an ambassador. That was good news, I thought.

We popped out of warp right on schedule and there was the giant hazy red sun that was Aldebaran, staring us right in the face. It seemed to fill the entire sky.

Our astrogator plotted a course rapidly for Aldebaran VII, which was then at perihelion and a good ways across the heavens from where we were. The Aldebaran system is a huge one—31 planets spread out over six or seven billion miles of space.

Most of them were dead worlds, though. It was only Aldebaran VII that had any sort of intelligent life, or so our survey teams reported.

IT TOOK THREE DAYS MORE to get within hailing distance of the seventh planet. It spun beneath us, a pretty blue-green ball about the size of Earth.

We came within about a million miles and set up an orbit as per

instructions. No sooner had we done that than we found ourselves surrounded by a flock of alien warships.

I went to the radio room and made contact.

"State name and object here," I was ordered in a crisp, business-like voice.

"I'm Johnny Martin, Captain of the Terran vessel 13-XV-1, with no hostile intent. We're here to pick up an ambassador from Aldebaran to Earth, along with his pet."

I heard some hasty conferring going on and then someone said, "Hold on, Terran ship. We'll check with the home planet."

Five tense minutes passed—minutes in which I half expected to be blown out of the sky by a sudden attack. You never can tell with aliens. They're likely to do almost anything; their psychologies are unpredictable in Terran terms—as, I guess, ours are in theirs.

But finally my receiver crackled and the alien voice said, "Everything is clear, X 13-XV-1. Remain in orbit and ambassador will be transferred to your ship. Any suspicious move on your part will bring immediate attack by our defense fleet."

"Don't worry. I'm not going any place. I'll wait right here."

I watched in the viewscope as

a small ship bellied upward from the blue-green world below and approached us. They matched velocities with us, airlock to airlock.

"Get that fluorine room ready," I ordered my men. "The Ambassador's coming aboard."

The two ships hung side by side in space. Of course, there was no apparent relative motion since we had the same velocity. It was possible to walk back and forth from their ship to ours.

"Prepare to receive Ambassador," came the message from the other ship. "His excellency, Quelf Tharkol, Minister Plenipotentiary—and his pet."

"I'm ready," I said. "Our airlock's open."

Slowly the lock of the other ship slid back and two spacesuited figures appeared—the Ambassador, Quelf Tharkol, and his pet. The Ambassador was invisible within his spacesuit but he stood upright and looked to be about the size of a man. I was happy about that; it's always a lot easier to negotiate with a humanoids-type alien than with something totally bizarre.

I chuckled when I saw the spacesuited cat—for so I thought of it. It was cat-size, in a little form-fitting spacesuit, and it scampered after its master on four legs, spacesuited tail wagging behind. It was sort of a cute little thing, I thought;

no wonder its master didn't care to leave it behind.

"Everything all set?" I asked.

"Transfer is completed," said the captain of the other ship. He closed his lock and pulled away from us.

"Close the lock!" I ordered.

I gestured to a crewman standing by. "Show the Ambassador to his room," I said.

When the Ambassador and his pet were in their special fluorinated stateroom I called them on the special television hookup I had set up between them.

They had taken their spacesuits off and were lying sprawled out in their green murky atmosphere, the Ambassador in his bunk and the pet in his. I could hardly see into the room over my circuit but I could see that the Ambassador was very human and that the pet was pretty much like a cat, except that he had sharp-clawed fingers instead of the soft little pads a cat has.

"Everything all right in there?" I asked.

"Fine, just fine. How long will it take to get to Earth?"

"About three weeks," I said. "We'll be going into warp any minute."

"Very well," came the reply.

I DIDN'T EXPECT to have many dealings with the Am-

bassador. I had been told that he would have his own food supply and naturally he was confined to his fluorinated stateroom. So we settled down to a pleasant return trip.

But on the second day of warp I was awakened from sweet dreams by Whitey Durbin, the Night Engineer. He shoved me around in my bunk until I opened one eye and said "Whatsamatter?"

"It's the cat, Chief!"

"Cat? What cat? You crazy, Whitey? Lemme go back to sleep."

But he was obstinate. "The Ambassador's pet. It's out of its room."

"Huh? But it can't breathe—"

"It's wearing a spacesuit. And it's wandering all over the ship, snooping around. I caught it in the drive section and up front with the charts. I don't like it, Chief."

"No. Neither do I." I was wide awake all at once. There had been something fishy about this pet business all along and now I was suspicious. Suppose the pet were a little smarter than a cat? Suppose it was snooping around innocently enough — and actually soaking up vital secret information about the workings of a Terran spaceship?

But I didn't know what to do. My orders stressed the fact that I had to handle the Ambassador with kid gloves—but on the other

hand, was I supposed to let that creature roam all over the ship?

"Get me a hookup with Home Base," I said. "And in the meantime keep an eye on that cat. Don't let it catch wise but try to follow it around. And *don't* stop it from roaming. These aliens may be touchy about the funniest things

I got in touch with Home Base in jig time. Commander Mahoney was the man I spoke to.

"How's that Ambassador, Martin?"

"That's why I'm calling, sir. You see—the Ambassador's pet is creeping all around the ship. It's sort of a cat but I wonder whether maybe it's doing a very neat job of spying on us."

"Have you taken any action yet?"

"No. I wanted to check with Home Base."

Mahoney thought for a moment. "I suppose it would be all right to speak to the Ambassador about this and tactfully request that he keep the creature in his own quarters. But be *tactful* about it, Martin. Remember, we don't want to offend these aliens."

IT WAS THE MIDDLE of the "night" aboard ship, so I didn't think it would be particularly tactful to call the Ambassador just then.

I waited until morning, by which time my men reported that the cat had completed its survey and had promptly returned to the Ambassador's room.

—When the television came on, the Ambassador and his pet were again reclining leisurely on their bunks. —

"Sorry if I'm disturbing you," I said hesitantly.

"That's quite all right. What can I do for you?"

"A matter of shipboard procedure I'd like to point out. It seems last night your pet left your cabin and explored the ship, or so some of my men reported. I'd appreciate it if you'd restrain the animal to quarters from now on. It upsets shipboard routine—and, besides, my instructions request that I keep the operating sections of the ship under security wrap."

There was silence for a moment. I held my breath, hoping I hadn't said something wrong, some thing that might foul up the delicate Earth-Aldebaran negotiations in progress.

Finally came the reply. "I understand fully. I'm sorry about the exploration trip — it was mere curiosity. It won't be repeated. But you're mistaken about one thing."

"What's that?" I asked somewhat puzzledly.

"My pet remained in the cabin all night. I was the one who explored the ship." There was a sneer in his voice.

"You? But—"

My mouth clammed shut. And then I understood. I couldn't keep the flush of embarrassment from my face and he saw it over the screen. It seemed to please him. Pretty damned clever, I thought. Smart psychology for the aliens to bring a "human" as a pet, putting our diplomats on the defensive right from the start. The Ambassador must have known what I was thinking for the sneer grew on his face.

Then suddenly I grinned. It seemed to surprise him. This, he hadn't expected.

"Captain, something strikes you as humorous?" There was uncertainty in his tone. Plus a little annoyance.

My grin widened. "Just a little private joke, Ambassador," I said. I was thinking that this joker was in for a shock. Two planets could play at this game and I would have plenty of time to tip off Home-Base.

Afterall, we have pets too....

THE END

BARNSTORMER

by

Tom W. Harris

Murph was a man to be admired, Pete knew, for Murph had a silver rocket and a passport to the stars. Now Murph had promised him a ride . . .

CAREFUL TO KEEP trees and bushes between himself and the cottage, the boy legged it across the fields toward the glass rocket poised in Johnson's pasture, glittering and slim like a dark, slender dancer. To Pete it was all the promise in the world distilled into a pointed black glass bottle. But to the women in the cottage. . .

He glanced back. Apparently they hadn't seen him. He had to hurry, because he had something to ask Murph Vanderpool, the rocketman, and sometime tomorrow the rocket would be gone.

His grandmother and his mother would be glad when it was gone. To them it was a monstrous and terrible symbol of something, and, like an evil woman, most terrible because of its beauty.

"Just can't get away from them," his grandmother had said at lunch,

gazing irefully out the window toward where it stood. She was a stiffbacked old lady with a valentine face where something wintry mixed with something mild. "I moved out here on the edge of a little town and thought I'd got away from 'em — and the television's full of 'em — and the magazines full of 'em — and now this barnstormer sets one down practically in the backyard!"

Pete curled his brows in a way that made the women remember his father. "What's wrong with rockets, Grammy?"

"No reason for them! No reason for men to want to go way off hundreds of miles from earth, getting lost, getting killed! We had jets — we should have been satisfied."

She sighed, and her daughter-in-law echoed it. Looking out the window their thoughts ran to space



and rockets and their men, who had been rocketmen and who would never come back. What was left of them was still out there, moving eternally through lonesome space in straight lines or circling some dead moon or planet. The gray-haired woman's thoughts ran to the husband torn and destroyed when the early test ship burst on the moon-run, and the other

woman's mind reached grieving toward her own husband, the gray-haired woman's son, whose ship had turned in an instant to a molten glob when its white metal coating suddenly peeled and it took the full, brutal hammer of the sun.

The younger ran her fingers through Pete's spiky hair. "Petey, you're not to see that barnstormer any more."

"Aw—fooher! Fooner!"

His grandmother raised her hands. "Where do they pick up that awful slang?"

Pete scowled out the window, thinking of the rocket, the knobs and slings and dials within it, the feel of speed and space and war about it, the slash-grinned young god who rode it. He had something to ask Murph.

"Aw fooner," he muttered.

His mother swung him to her lap. "Shall we tell him about the surprise?"

Pete thought he caught something odd—a nearly invisible craft or knowingness—in the glance they traded.

"You didn't get much for your birthday last week, Pete," his mother beamed, "so we decided to give you a kind of late-birthday party. You're going to have that picnic on Indian Hill. It'll be an all-day picnic, with all the youngsters you know, hunting for arrowheads and relics. We're going in Mr. Fobey's copter."

"Oh boy! Indian Hill! At last!" Then he sobered, thinking of paunchy, bland-faced, nervous Mr. Fobey.

"Will Fobey bring his air sluice?"

"He says he will."

"All right then. Indian Hill! Whoopee!"

He kissed them and went larking toward the door but his mother snagged him.

"I hope you aren't forgetting your chores, young man."

"Yeah—weeding. I don't see why we don't have all ponics, like everybody else. Gee whiz, can't I skip it just today. It's the next to the last day for the Hester."

"What's the Hester, for goodness sake?"

"Why, the rocket! The glass rocket!"

She held her son's head between her hands and held her eyes on his. "Pete, we told you not to go near that rocket. I mean it. Stay...away...from...it! I know what I'm saying. Stay away from it!"

He scuffled his feet. "Okay mom. Okay then. Okay."

HALF AN HOUR LATER he was legging it across the fields, keeping trees and shrubs between himself and the cottage, and three quarters of an hour later he was handing a crescent wrench to Murph Vanderpool, who had found a loose bolt in the rig of the double-slung pilot's cradle. Weeding was forgotten. His nostrils were full of hexadrine, his eyes were full of dials and levers and words like "parsecs" and "off ram—on ram," and his head was full of dreams.

The Hester. Ever so slightly scored along her sides with the nailhead meteorites she had brushed rushingly aside. An imperceptible waver in her hull where a Panasia heat shell had nearly downed her. Glamorous witch of space. Cleopatra's needle of outer gulfs.

He knew about her. The Federation had won the war when they began casting rockets of the new, light, tough glass, mass-producing swarms to oust Panasia in the battles fought in the black deeps beyond the bounds of earth with weapons that would have destroyed both sides if used on the home planet. And after the war thousands of the rockets had been sold, and many had gone to the young men like Murph whom the war had made into spacemen before they had a chance at any other business and who did not want now, ever, to be anything but spacemen, rocketmen. They went about the country selling rocket rides. Tradition had given them a name from another postwar epoch: barnstormers.

Pete handed the wrench to the barnstormer. "Which are the dark-light controls?"

"Holy tubes," grinned Murph, pushing the black hair from his eyes, "If you weren't such a handy kid you'd be a nuisance. Here." He pushed a button, and the dark hull grew clear, letting in the sunlight.

Murph pushed deeper and the hull darkened. He twirled and a long, clear porthole appeared along the rows of seats.

"Polaroid can keep radion or light. — sunlight can be enough to kill you. Or you can clear a place to look through."

"Can I work it, huh?"

"Just once."

Pete manipulated the button. Then he held his breath, glanced at Murph, and slipped into the pilot's cradle. It was too wide and deep but he imagined that he filled it. He imagined the switchboard alive and winking and his body weighing a thousand tons, then weighing nothing at all. The Hester had passed escape velocity, cast off gravity, and earth lay already ten thousand miles behind her. The board showed she had slewed a little because of the slight warp in the hull. He corrected course. Then he cut power, and the ship went driving on with nothing to stop it at thirty thousand miles an hour.

Murph let him sit there a full minute. Then he lifted him down.

"Let's go outside, see if there's any business."

There wasn't, and they lounged on a piece of canvas in the blackened blast area.

The band-radio around Pete's shoulder pulsed gently. He dialed it up.

"I know where you are, Peter. I want you back here right this instant. Your mother and I both. . ."

He dialed off.

"Anything else I can do for you, Murph?"

"Well—you might go to Rannel's store, after awhile, and get me a couple packs of self-lights. I'm about out of smokes."

"Be glad to."

Pete basked in the shared male moments. "What was it you were telling me about hyperspace yesterday?"

Murph told him more about hyperspace, the untapped dimension which had to exist, the magic hole in space into which a ship would slip someday and emerge not in new systems but new galaxies. "When we find hyperspace and get the photon drive—then we'll really be making it."

"Think we ever will?"

"Sure we will."

That was it. Sure we will. He lay and gazed into the sky. How far did it go? Someday he would be up there.

The radio pulsed again, and he told himself he didn't feel it. He rolled around and looked at Murph. He might as well ask his important question.

"Murph—are you gonna take me up?"

"Shoot, kid, I can't burn juice

just taking one guy for a joyride."

"How about if you get a full load except one? Couldn't I sit in?"

Murph thought about it. "Well, you've been a lot of help and company, and you're a smart kid, too. I'll do it."

Pete didn't do anything so childish as leaping into the air but he allowed himself to walk over and stroke the alluring flanks of the Hester. He felt wonderful. And around the hull of the rocket strode his mother.

"Why didn't you answer us?"

"Gosh—did you call me? Maybe my radio isn't working."

She dialed and spoke into it. His grandmother answered. "I've got him," said his mother, and dialed down.

She took him by the arm and shook him. "Come along!"

"That's scranny! I've got to get Murph cigarettes! He's going to take me up! Ain't that right, Murph?"

Murph had scrambled up, red and apologetic. "I'm sorry, lady—I didn't know you wanted him home. I'm really sorry."

"You idiot!" was all she said, flouncing by him with Pete held by the arm.

She shook Pete more and more angrily as they half ran toward home. Then suddenly he felt her trembling all over, and she broke

into tears.

She held him to her fiercely and suffocatingly. "They're *not* going to get you. You're going to promise!"

Bewildered and a little frightened, he pushed his head against her like a stubborn calf and was silent.

H E FELT A LITTLE chastened by the time they arrived home, but then things blew up again. Granny pulled the trigger. Smiling, she hugged him and said, "Cheer up, Pete — tomorrow's the picnic on Indian Hill."

They were using Indian Hill to cancel out his last day with the Hester! He gritted his teeth with a scrawtch that raised goose pimples even on himself. "I won't go! It doesn't have to be tomorrow!"

Grammy's face began to winter and his mother's face grew harder as she said, very firmly, "It's tomorrow, and you certainly *are* coming."

"I won't!" he exploded, and ran out to the barn.

He lay in the hay in the tallest now, feeling like a miserable sick solitary cat. After awhile he dialed his radio, 29 on the eight orb, and Murph came right in.

"How's it goin', Murph?"

"Oh—it's you. You in trouble?"

"Nah—but can't see you to-

day. I wondered if you could take me up tomorrow? I mean, if there's room, that is?"

"Your Ma want you to go up?"

"It's okay—they just wanted me for chores today. How about it?"

"Sure, if there's room."

"Hooray! See you tomorrow."

"Okay, kid. And look—if you don't make it, I'll blow you a kiss."

"What's that?"

"I thought you knew. You know how the jet flame is? Blue. Well, if you change the fuel mix it goes orange. That's blowing a kiss. Every rocketman knows about it."

"Wow! I'll be there, though. You won't have to blow me one."

"Okay, Pete."

"Okay, Murph."

They dialed out.

He lay in the hay a long time, making his plans. In the morning the women were delighted with him. He bubbled about relics and Indian bones and pranced and paced and kept running to the window to look for Mr. Fobey's copter. When it settled and the port opened he whooped aboard, the first one on, and scrambled into the baggage hold. He slammed the little door and slid a screwdriver between the knob and the door frame.

Up forward, he heard the others boarding. I gotta work fast, he told himself.

Somebody began to pound on

the little door. "Petey's in there!" piped a voice. "He won't let anybody else in!"

He could tell it was old blabbermouth Sally Doolittle, that all the kids called a nose little squirt.

"I'm gonna watch through the glass deck!" he yelled. "It's my party, and I'm gonna watch alone."

Crouching in the small hold, he began to work at the catches of the unloading hatch. He wasn't sure it opened from the inside—but it had to. He had to drop through before the copter left the ground.

The motors started.

He heard his mother's voice. "That's not like you, Pete. What are you doing in there? Open this door!"

"I'm trying," he called. "The lock's busted."

He got the last catch loose and strained up on the hatch. As it opened the copter lifted. He stared downward. They were high and getting higher. He'd better drop quick. Murph wouldn't have been scared he told himself, and plummeted through the opening.

He hit on his toes, let his legs buckle, and rolled into a hedge. His feet felt as though bombs had gone off under them. He lay half stunned, waiting for the copter to get well off, then tried to stand up.

He was able to. He tried to walk,

and was able to. He began to run across the fields, skirting trees and bushes. If the baggage door held shut and they didn't see him above, he had plenty of time to get to Murph and into the Hester.

HE WAS HALFWAY there when the copter veered and came humming back. It came dropping toward him and he knew he was spotted. He ran stumbling into a stretch of trees and woods, altered course and dropped behind a big rock at the edge of the trees. There were leaves drifted against it and he burrowed under them. Panting, sweaty and itching, with aching legs, he watched and listened as the copter landed.

The port opened and they poured out. "He doesn't know what he's doing," said his mother. "We're going to find him."

Mr. Fobey drew back a little, his rubbery face pink-creased and nervous. "In there—in all the brush and snakes and swamp?"

She set her jaw and touched his arm. "I'm counting on you, Mr. Fobey."

They entered the woods, the children ranging ahead like shrill, bloodhungry little pups, poking and peeping and rustling. Pete tried to lie like a stone beneath the leaves.

The adults might not have found him, but the children hunted him eagerly and fiercely, like some

huge prize Easter egg, and the sudden screech of little Sally Doo-little skirled his discovery.

Mr. Fobey came up first. Pete stood up, leaf-cluttered, and screamed at him. "You're a stupid fat crot!" he shrilled. "A crot! A godamn stupid fat crot, and leave me alone, I'm not going with you!"

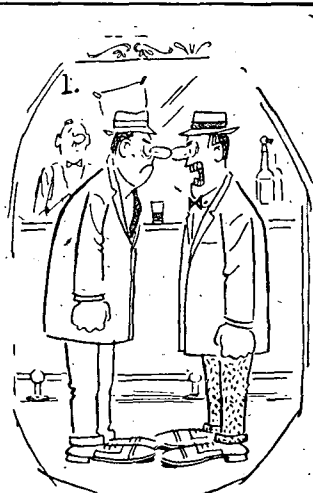
But he did go with them.

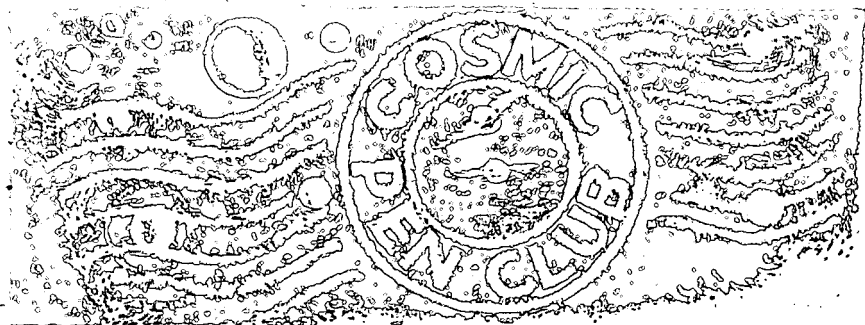
On Indian Hill, Fobey set up his air sluice, stripping off the soil as dust and laying it back down as dirt. They turned up flint arrowheads and pestels and they found a buried skeleton, an orange smear on the breast bone where a talisman bag had lain. The children cheered and laughed and quarrelled — all but Pete. Pete climbed a tall pine.

All afternoon he watched the

black glass rocket lift high on its fine blue skirt and streak toward the cold black place of stars, and come dropping back like a needle that is light as a feather, to take on more joyriders and swoop back upward. It was like watching unfolding poems in motion.

I'll be a spaceman, he told himself. *I don't care what happens, I'm going to be a spaceman!* He stayed in the tree all day and watched the Hester rise and return and on the last flight, when she lifted on a voyage that would terminate in some other part of the country in some other field, he saw the regal blue of the jet suddenly flush to a deep rose orange, then back to blue, and he thought of Murph and was suddenly happy. His day would come.





A department for all our readers throughout the world; here you can meet new friends who are interested in the same things you are. Listings are free, so send in yours today!

LITERARY EDITOR

Ray Nelson: 212 Columbia Ave., Berkeley, Cal.

Age 25: "I'm single, associate editor of a little literary magazine, *Miscellaneous Man*. I'm interested in writing and illustrating s-f, also commercial art, far-out music—particularly percussion, poetry, modern dance, and travel. Would particularly like to contact fans of the 1949-54 period."

AIRCRAFT TECHNICIAN

Billy J. Smith: 11204 Love Ave., NE, Albuquerque, New Mex.

Age 25: "I work as an Aircraft Instrument Technician, and am interested in S-F, writing, radio, TV, and collecting s-f and Edgar Rice Burroughs. I have many extra magazines and ERB novels to trade for similar items. Also have an extensive comic book collection, pre-1943."

STUDENT

John P. Stratton: 20 Burns St., New Haven, Conn.

Age 16: "I'm a prep school student, interested in corresponding with anyone interested in s-f, especially parallel worlds, extraterrestrial life, and ESP. Also, on a more mundane level I enjoy swimming, boating, and chemical experimentation."

SOPHOMORE

David Rolfe: E3136 11th Ave., Spokane, Wash.

Age 16: "I'm a high school sophomore, interested in almost all branches of science. I collect stamps and enjoy chess. Items of particular interest: flying saucers, psionics, and mathematics. Hope to become a computer technician and part-time writer. Would like to correspond with anyone interested in playing

chess by mail, and will also welcome letters from all other fans."

EXPERIMENTAL RESEARCHER

Earl A. Rockwood: 218 Water St., Clinton, Mass.

Age 31: "I'm an experimental research worker by profession, with hobbies including stamps, science fiction, photography, reading, and corresponding. I will welcome letters from anyone, anyplace."

SENIOR

Jim Davis: 5308 Palo Duro, NE, Albuquerque, New Mex.

Age 17: "I'm a high school senior, interested in reading, writing, archery and swimming. I would like to hear from other teenage fans and also fans in the adult group. I'd especially enjoy hearing from fans in the Hawaiian Islands."

STUDENT

John Richards: 2833 SE 154th Ave., Portland 66, Ore.

Age 15: "I'm interested in writing, acting, illustrating, cryptography, s-f, frontier, and medieval literature. Also like chess. Interested in corresponding with guys and gals my age."

STUDENT

Pat LeRoux: Rt. 133, Box 31, Jean Duluth Rd., Duluth, Minn.

Age 16: "I'm a femme s-f fan, and have been ever since 6th grade. I like rock 'n roll, dancing, swimming, skating, and most other

sports. I'm interested in astronomy and the supernatural. Would like to hear from others with similar interests."

CLERK

Dorthie Beard: 3953 32nd St., San Diego 4, Cal.

Age 21: "I work for a large cleaning firm, with personal interests of telepathy (ESP) reading—s-f, western romances, mystery—dancing, and people. Hope to hear from someone."

AIRCRAFT WORKER

Peter R. Bond: Lockheed Aircraft Corp., Dept. 81-21, Bldg. 66A, Plant A-1, Burbank, Cal.

Age 26: "I'm a price estimator here at Lockheed. I've been an s-f reader for 12 years, ex-sailor, ex-paratrooper. Avidly interested in travel, electronics, and, of course, s-f. I'll answer all letters."

STUDENT

James H. Fahey, Jr.: 753 Braden St., Waynesburg, Pa.

Age 15: "I'm a high school freshman, with interests including football, astronomy, s-f, interplanetary travel, and time travel. Would also like to exchange ideas on flying saucers."

STUDENT

Sandra E. Hawkins: 1233 King St., W., Toronto 3, Ont., Canada.

Age 18: "I'm interested in s-f, hockey, football, stock cars, base-

ball, music—Perry Como, rock 'n roll—and reading—s-f and historical novels. Hope to hear from American fans."

STUDENT

Eugene Gulinson: Koinonia Farm, Americus, Ga.

Age 14: "I'm a student, an s-f fan, with other interests including golf, pool, and cars. Would like to correspond with other guys and gals interested similarly."

CHILD PSYCHOLOGIST

E. L. Thompson: 6603 Middleton St., Huntington Park, Cal.

Age 28: "I'm a psychologist, interested in s-f, reincarnation, with hobbies including Transportation Tokens, model trains, and photography. Will welcome correspondents."

CONSTRUCTION BUSINESS

Carl S. Hiatt: 1005 Grant St., Danville, Ill.

Age 42: "I'm in the construction business, with a love of sports, outdoor life, music and books of historical background. I enjoy s-f and movies of like nature."

STUDENT

Bonnie Logan: 8722-83rd Ave., Edmonton, Alta., Canada.

Age 16: "I'm a high school student, just recently interested in science fiction. I would like to hear from other s-f fans in my age bracket."

COLLEGE STUDENT

Nan Mason: 1038 E. Rock Springs Rd., Atlanta 6, Ga.

Age 19: "I'm a student at Emory University, single, interested in astronomy, stamp collecting, hi-fi, and science fiction. I'd like to correspond with those who have similar interests as well as those who don't. Am also interested in joining an s-f club."

STUDENT

Barbara Ann Parker: 505 Main St., Toronto, Ohio.

Age 17: "I'm a high school student and science fiction fan. Have many hobbies, including tap dancing, oil painting, foreign languages, swimming, and—believe it or not, big game hunting."

LAB TECHNICIAN

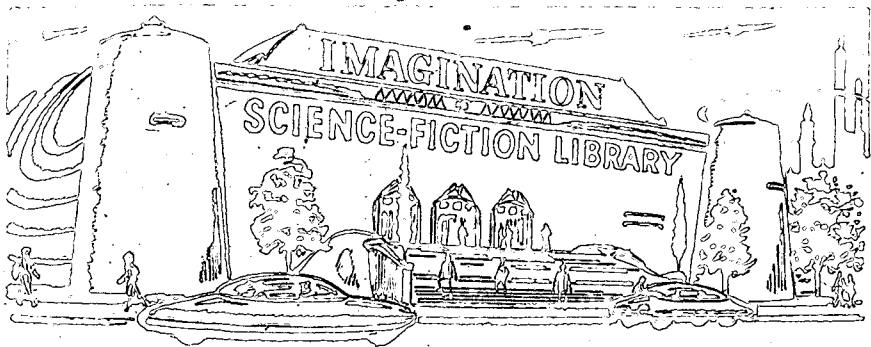
David Snyder: 1027 9th St., Apt. 28, Los Alamos, New Mex.

Age 28: "I'm single, and a laboratory technician here at Los Alamos. Besides s-f I enjoy outdoor sports, pop music, auto racing and science. I'll enjoy hearing from anyone."

ARTIST

Bob A. Blackburn: Olmstedville, N. Y.

Age 20: "I'm an artist, with interests including biology, electronics, and psychic phenomena. Like swimming and outdoor camping, which I do a lot of up here in the Adirondacks. Hope to hear from guys and gals similarly inclined."



— REVIEWING CURRENT SCIENCE FICTION BOOKS —

Conducted by Henry Bott

Hard cover science fiction is booming and many fine novels and anthologies are available at all bookstores or by writing direct to the publishers. Each month IMAGINATION will review one or more — candidly — as a guide to your book purchases.

THE DOOR INTO SUMMER

by Robert A. Heinlein, \$2.95, 188 pages, Doubleday & Company, Garden City, New York.

With his unerring instinct for “imaginative” realism, Robert Heinlein has repeated another of his almost inevitable triumphs in science fiction novels. “The Door Into Summer” is more than beautifully titled. It is another of those famous examples of what can be done with a trite theme by a good story teller.

Daniel Boone Davis, disgusted with his 1970 world and at odds with his business partners, goes into suspended animation for thirty years - a practice common to the peoples of the Seventies. Of course in the back of his mind is the idea of meeting his enemies in the future — they badly ravaged by time.

That's all there is to Heinlein's slender framework, but it is a joy to read. The commonplaces of everyday living, foods, clothes, customs, artifacts, are so believably described and so naturally fitted into the story that it is as if Heinlein's pre-science enabled him to act as an “archeologist” of the Not-Yet.

He uses the language in his free-wheeling style; there is no conscious attempt at style, apparently, but the vernacular, idiom and patois of the future are real.

A student is told always to “go to the master” — Heinlein's material should be served as texts for every writer in the field of s-f today.

I guarantee that you will not put down this book once you've begun it — don't wait . . .



Conducted by Robert Bloch.

MANY YEARS AGO a bright young fan named Wilson came up with a neologism and I came down with pneumonia.

My pneumonia is long gone, but the neologism is still with us. It's *gafia*, and as every true fan knows, this term is a condensation of the phrase, "Getting away from it all."

At the time it came into popular usage, it signified a temporary departure from fandom. After cranking out a Tenth Anniversary issue of 100 pages, answering 78 letters from regular correspondents and 86 letters from constipated ones, a fan often announced that he was *gafia* for a while.

Sometimes he gave up fandom for as long as six whole weeks and took refuge in some strange pastime such as reading science fiction stories in order to give his mind a complete rest. But you could generally count on his reappearance at the

end of this time, bringing out another issue of his fanzine with 150 pages in order to make up for his long absence.

Six weeks, as I recall, was just about the maximum amount of *gafia* any fan ever permitted himself. And I've known of cases where *gafia* didn't last for more than two hours—notably, at the 1948 Convention in Toronto, when a prominent fan spotted a strange blonde and disappeared with her.

But times have changed.

Today *gafia* has assumed alarming proportions, and nowhere is this more clearly indicated than in the ranks of fanzine publishers and editors.

Up until several years ago, it was customary to assume that the majority of fan magazines were issued on a monthly basis; indeed, some of the better-known and best-remembered often made more than

twelve appearances a year. At times, stung by creative frenzy, certain editors would glut the market: I well remember a fateful October, back in 1952, when Lee Hoffman produced three separate and distinct fanzines.

There were some bi-monthly efforts, it is true, but these were apt to make up for less frequency with more bulk. While the hundred-plus-page fan magazine has always been a comparative rarity, there were a lot of fifty-pagers.

Today the entire publishing picture has changed. As of this writing only one fanzine—YANDRO—consistently maintains the monthly schedule, according to my present knowledge. The bulk of the self-labelled bi-monthlies are apt to fall behind their announced publication dates, and even the editors of the quarterlies have been known to slip up on issues. It is increasingly common to find publications designating their policy simply as "irregular".

Now it is not the point and purpose of this editorial essay to criticize or condemn the chronological logic of fan-publishers. Getting out a fanzine is hard work, and calls for an expenditure of hard cash, too. It is neither as cheap nor as easy to produce a fanzine today as it was fifteen, ten, or even five years ago. There are practical reasons to account for the falling-off in fan magazine publication recently; these are acknowledged and accepted.

But the fact remains that there is less activity on the part of editors and publishers in the fan field.

Along with this—and perhaps,

partially, because of it—there is less activity on the part of writers and artists who generally contribute to fan magazines. With a few notable exceptions (John Berry, for example, as a writer: Arthur Thomson and William Rotsler as artists) the prolific contributor is a rarity today.

In an Amateur Press Association, where a multiplicity of members virtually assures a fat representation in the quarterly mailings, such inactivity is not generally noticed; but in the general-subscription fanzines it's easy to see how many have chosen the *gafia* route. Easy to see, and somewhat hard to take. Again, it's not a matter of shame or blame: evolution plays its part, and the better fan-writers often turn pro, selling what they used to give away for free. Other fans waste their time on such vain pursuits as growing up, making a living, getting married, having children or similar unrewarding projects. Let them, it's their privilege.

But as a result, the fan field seems to be dwindling rather than increasing in scope.

Not only are there less fanzines; there seem to be less active fan clubs, less active letter-hacks, less active participants in conventions and gatherings. I have no statistical data to support these conclusions, and it may be that my own observations are limited; nevertheless, I get the distinct impression that fandom lacks the full-fledged support it once enjoyed. While the attendance at national and regional conventions continues to grow, the number of those who rise above the merely passive role of spectator-

critic continues to decline.

Now there are certain obvious remedies for this condition, and it might be well to consider a few of them here.

First of all, there's the matter of *government subsidy*. Small business loans could be granted to fanzine publishers; contributors could be given unemployment compensation, and conventions could be underwritten by the Department of Education. This is not as far-fetched as it sounds: I've learned a lot at conventions, believe me. And the subsidy notion is not without precedent: doesn't the government give money to farmers to grow certain things, and even give them money to *not* grow things? So why not pay fanzine publishers to publish certain things? And surely there would be no question about the rewarding results of paying certain publishers to *not* publish at all.

But it may be objected that this policy would lead to lobbying, pressure-groups, politics, and Sam Moskowitz. So in the interests of Clean Fandom, let's examine some alternatives.

The next best thing is a self-regulatory system; setting up a group of rules and procedures to govern fan activity.

I MENTIONED a while back the propensity exhibited by certain fans to *gafia* as the result of growing up. Might it not therefore be a worthwhile thing to institute some kind of preliminary examination for would-be fans and make sure that they passed certain basic tests? A standard I.Q. test might in itself

do the trick: if no one were allowed to participate in fan activity unless he had an I.Q. of less than 80, we'd be reasonably certain that the danger of "growing up" would be partially eliminated. As it is, fandom today seems to have several members with a slightly higher I.Q., and they may be dropping out any day now.

Then there's this business of getting married, and having children. One usually seems to follow the other—though not necessarily in the same order.

Well, there's a way around this, too. If there's one thing appropriate to the advocates of Clean Fandom, it's sterilization. This may sound a bit drastic to some neo-fans, but I respectfully submit: either Fandom is truly a Way of Life, or it's nothing at all. A husband hasn't got the right to just walk off and leave his wife: why should a fan have the right to stop cranking and slink away from his mimeograph? Sterilization would certainly solve a lot of fandom's problems. And something tells me that if it had only been generally employed twenty years ago, on the *parents* of certain fans, it would have helped solve a lot more.

But for those who think hysterectomy and vasectomy too drastic, and government support too difficult, there is another solution. It's called *participation*.

There is no necessity to publish a monthly fanzine, or to subscribe to all of them, or to contribute to all of them; no urgent need to plunge into a whirlwind of letter-writing, club-organizing or conventioning.

But a very small increase of activity on the part of fans would result in an immediately noticeable boost to the field, all along the line. This is so obvious, so self-evident, that I have no intention of laboring the point.

Nor is it necessary to extol the benefits of this move.

Some people fan for pleasure, some with an eye to future profit and self-improvement. No matter what the motive may be, it's a foregone conclusion that an enlarged field makes for an enlarged scope of operations. In a day when simple justice is sometimes seemingly difficult to come by; when the relationship between cause and effect is often complicatedly obscure, fandom is a welcome study in contrast. It's still a simple field of activity, subject to self-evident laws. That is to say, you generally get out of it just what you put into it. You are rewarded on the basis of what you are willing, and able, to contribute to the field.

But there are limits which it would be well to recognize. Some of the *gafia* victims were not only recognized as active fans but as overactive ones; people who plunged right in, made a big splash, and paddled madly to stay in the swim, unaware that such prolonged exertion could lead only to cramps and drowning. Going down for the third time, they suddenly realized the danger and scrambled out of the water and rushed away: most of them have never been back and wouldn't get their feet wet in fandom again.

We must admit the possibility of peril in an obsession with fanning

or any other hobby; at the same time conceding that the fault lies not in the hobby itself but in the personal approach and attitude towards it.

So it is that I urge no one to venture beyond his depth; at the same time making the suggestion that a lot of fans are wading in the shallowest activity when they might be enjoying themselves more if they chose to enter the main current.

We do need a few more active fans today. Come on in, the water's fine!

Meanwhile, back on the beach, the fanzines have piled up. Time for a bit of beach-combing.

First, and by all means foremost, let's consider a special publication—THE HARP STATESIDE (Walt Willis, 170 Upper Newtownards Rd., Belfast, Northern Ireland: 35c: illustrated by Arthur Thomson and slipsheeted by Carol Willis).

Here, under one cover, is the complete, 71-page account of Walter A. Willis' fabulous trip to the United States in 1952; a saga which has seen publication before only in fragmentary installments spread over several fanzines and a number of years.

Read *in toto*, THE HARP STATESIDE must take preeminence in many categories: it is one of the finest bits of fanwriting ever published and ranks with the same author's THE ENCHANTED DUPLICATOR for its warmth and whimsy: at the same time, it is also one of the best complete Convention reports issued, one of the best jobs of humor, and one of the

best serious efforts as well. This, of course, is only my personal opinion, and you can take it for what it's worth—but I think 35c is a very nominal figure.

I've read \$4.00 books by visiting Englishmen and renegade Frenchmen which gave a far less vivid and penetrating analysis of American folkways and byways; and this work has an added interest in that it deals primarily with fannish folkways and fannish folk examined firsthand in their native haunts.

As Dante led his readers through the Seven Circles of Hell, so does Willis lead you to feud-riddled New York . . . to the morass of the Morrison Hotel and the '52 Convention . . . to the home of Ray Palmer and Richard Shaver . . . through the Wild West and the Grand Canyon country with Forry Ackerman and Rog Phillips . . . to the haunts of West Coast Fandom . . . to the dismal swamplands with Lee Hoffman, Girl Swamper . . . and back to New York and the lair of the dreaded Hydra itself.

The work abounds with candid opinions, vignettes, character portraits and assassinations, all interspersed (to say nothing of just plain spersed) with typical Willis witticisms, puns, *bon mots*, bum *mots*, and just plain enjoyable reading. For a man who was obviously laboring under a disadvantage during most of his stay in America (that is to say, he was sober) Willis has done a remarkable job of almost total recall.

INSIDE (Ron Smith, Box 356, Times Square Station, N.Y. 36: 5/\$1: bi-monthly) makes a belated

but welcome appearance. And what an appearance it is, with Alan Hunter's charming front and rear covers, featuring one of the most charming fronts and rears you could ever expect to encounter. Inside INSIDE one finds a discussion on psionics by L. Sprague de Camp, Dave Mason, and somebody named John W. Campbell, Jr. Dave Foley contributes a *pastiche* based, apparently, on a book called ANALYSE YOURSELF. The criticism department is headed up by James E. Gunn, who offers a thoughtful discussion of *damon knight's* IN SEARCH OF WONDER. As usual, one can only look at the magazine and quote Longfellow's line—"The Smith, a mighty man is he."

TRIODE No. 9 (Eric Bentcliffe, Terry Jeeves: subscriptions to Dale R. Smith, 3001 Kyle Ave., Minneapolis, Minn: quarterly: 7/\$1) offers a lineup of luminaries in Anglofandom—the two editors, plus Eric Needham, Mal Ashworth, Helen Winick, and the ubiquitous Arthur Thomson. Easy to see that Convention fever is beginning to take hold over these days.

YANDRO No. 49 (R. & J. Coulson, 407½ E. 6th St., North Manchester, Indiana: monthly: 10c) is—as stated above—the sole monthly fanzine now regularly scheduled. And definite proof that it's still possible to put out an interesting and entertaining effort every thirty days or so. A dependable dime's worth, definitely.

EXCELSIOR No. 1 (L. Shaw, Ltd., 545 Manor Road, Staten Island, N. Y.: irreg.; 7/\$1) is a newcomer that looks mighty good. Its editors have had some previous

experience in the field, since one of them put out the famous QUANDRY and the other has had a hand in the lesser-known magazine INFINITY. Together they have launched EXCELSIOR with the avowed intention of providing a meeting-ground for fans old and new, in the hopes of encouraging and developing fan talent. Recognizing that fandom of late has seemingly suffered from the diminution of interest noted in the forepart of this column, and recognizing too that "old line" fans have tended more and more to retreat into the ranks of small cliques and ingroups, the editors of EXCELSIOR have hung out a big WELCOME! sign and promise as frequent publication as time permits. Having always had a soft spot in my heart for Lee Hoffman and a soft spot in my head for Larry Shaw, I am frank to confess that I'm delighted to see them combining their talents on a fanzine.

FAFHRD No. 5 (Ron Ellik, 277 Pomona Ave., Long Beach 3, Calif.: irreg: free) offers a game-kit issue—complete rules, charts, descriptions of how to play INTERPLANETARY, for the benefit of all fans not equipped to play either footie or Presley records. In addition, a reprint of Dean Grennell's article on sliderules, plus a miscellany of reviews and letters.

SATA No. 6 (Bill Pearson, 4516 E. Glenrosa, Phoenix, Arizona: bi-monthly: 25c) offers three-color treatment of Dan Adkins illos, the usual reviews and letters, plus scads of fan-fiction. My personal opinion is that the illos are more professional than the writing: how-

ever one cannot judge fan-fiction by so-called pro standards.

MANA No. 2 (Bill Courval, 4215 Cherokee Ave., San Diego 4, Calif.: irreg.: no price) has a charming cover by Rich Kirs, apparently illustrating a scene at some convention when the sponsors discover they're going into the hole on costs. Inside there's a Murray Leinster article on science fiction, writing, plus material by Terry Carr, Dave Jenrette, Georgina Ellis and—just to make it official—John Berry, the Balzac of Belfast. This zine is not for the kiddies or the little old lady from Dubuque.

EYE No. 6 (Joy & Vin Clarke, 7 Inchmery Road, London S.E. 6, Eng.: irreg: no price) is another miscellaneous collection held together by a combination of staples and Arthur Thomson illustrations. Once again, a bit of interlineal reading discloses how preoccupied British fandom has become with the coming Con.

UMBRA (John Hitchcock, 300 E. University Pkwy., Baltimore, Md.: 7 times a year: 10c, 3/25c) offers fiction by John Berry and Dick Eney, reviews of Noah McLeod, and lots of letters to round-off its Third Anniversary issue. And many happy returns to you, John!

FOCUS (Mervyn Barrett, 6 Doctors Commons, Mt. Victoria, Wellington, New Zealand: irreg.: 15c) is an Anzac magazine which is not necessarily offering an Anzacversary issue. However, this one does contain material by such prominent New Zealanders as Don Ford and William Rotsler, plus letters from colonial types like Redd Boggs, Ron Ellik, Greg Benford, etc. Very

interesting effect: after reading this magazine, you put it down and suddenly realize that your eyes are out of FOCUS.

ETHERLINE (Ian J. Crozier: subscriptions from J. Ben Stark, 290 Kenyon Ave., Berkeley 4, Calif.: irreg.: 13/\$1) is an Australian fanzine, of which the present Convention Issue is a respectable No. 79. A fat 58 pages, plus another half-dozen or so of ads. featuring such Aussie types as Forrest J. Ackerman, Arthur C. Clarke, and somebody named Bloch, plus an assortment of viewers and reviewers who do a good job of covering the international sf scene.

ECLIPSE No. 19 (Ray Thompson, 519 7th Ave., Council Bluffs, Iowa: irreg.: 10c) offers John Berry, a plethora of reviews, and a cautious statement on the part of the editor that he may not be publishing too regularly in the future.

TWIG No. 3 (Guy E. Terwilliger, 1412 Albright St., Boise, Idaho: irreg.: 10c, 6/50c) lines up Ray Palmer, John Mussells, Marty Fleischman, Alan Dodd, the Coulsons, John Champion and Herbert Beach in a wide variety of offerings: the editor is frankly experimenting with policy and format. Worth watching for future developments.

BRILLIG No. 7 (Lars Bourne, 2436½ Portland St., Eugene, Oregon) is an OMPA magazine, which means it goes to members of this amateur press group—but maybe you can get a copy by request from the editor and read about Arthur C. Clarke's visit to Oregon, the musings of Ray Thompson, and an interesting short story by Don Stuf-

loten.

Another OMPA-zine is GALLERY No. 4 (Chuck Derry, 1814 62nd Ave., Cheverly, Maryland) and as with BRILLIG, you write, and request if you're interested in a John Berry Goon-saga, a variety of reviews and comments, and a yarn by Harry Warner, Jr. in a Yule-tide mood.

ORION (Paul Enever, 97 Pole Hill Rd., Hillingdon, Middlesex, England: quarterly: 4/50c) is filled with Atom and Terry Jeeves artwork, letters, reviews, and a fair amount of fannish fiction, including the inevitable (and inevitably amusing) bit by Berry.

From not too far away comes PLOY, the product of Ron Bennett and associates, but subscribers heed this address (Bob Pavlat, 6001 43rd Avenue, Hyattsville, Maryland: irreg.: 15c, 4/50c). Yes, John Berry is among those present too, and so is Pete Reischer, Laurence Sandfield, and a column—not an illustration—by Atom. Just to pad out the issue, there's even a longish bit by the editor of this column, reprinted from one of Karen Anderson's old fanzines and translated into English or an unreasonable facsimile thereof.

CONCEPT No. 3 is edited by Larry Ivie, but if you're interested, you'll want the address of the publisher (Ron Parker, 714 West 4th St., Tulsa 7, Okla.: bi-monthly: 25c, 5/\$1). It's a 44-page miscellany which is billed as containing, "Masterful Mimeography, Pulsating Plots, Four Colors, Three Staples, Justified Margins." All of which is correct, although in some instances the choice of the adjective "pulsat-

ing" may be considered not only apt but unfortunate.

CONCEPT has a good deal to say about such subjects as EC Comics, Superman, and the history of Frankenstein's monster; plus material on the Earp Brothers, phobias, and SF films. The position being that some of these matters are relevant to the "true thoughts, arts and literature of *our* times and of *tomorrow*." Whether you agree or not, you'll undoubtedly discover a diversification of material here.

SCIENCE FICTION PARADE (Len J. Moffat, 5969 Lanto St., Bell Gardens, Calif.: quarterly: no price) is offered to those interested enough to send letters of comment, and it's certainly worth commenting upon. Here is the best available guide to news of West Coast fandom, presented legibly and entertainingly, and with an enthusiasm which is self-evident and contagious. A nice job no matter how you look at it; which, if you're like I am, will be frequently and eagerly.

STF-IN-GEN & BOLLDE (Jerry DeMuth, 3223 Ernst St., Franklin Park, Ill.: irreg.: 15c 2/25c) is a long-deferred combination of prior publications from editor DeMuth and the assistant editor, Don Powell. A miscellany, and an interesting one, featuring DeMuth, Jim Foster, Kent Moomaw, Alan C. Elms, Jack Simmons and a cruelly critical article by the editor of this column which may amaze some people who think I never really blow my stack at anyone. If this seems discouraging, I suggest you try it for sighs.

TYPO No. 1 (Mike Moorcock, 36,

Semley Road, Norbury, London S.W. 16, England: quarterly: 4/35c) is an ambitious new venture by an English fan. He has managed to round up such Britisharpies as Alan Dodd, Ron Bennett and John Berry for his first issue, and is a first issue it augurs well for the future. Like most English fanzines, this one exhibits a keen sense of humor — just as American fanzines often display a keen sense of rumor.

Also from abroad comes the CAMBER ART FOLIO and CAMBER No. 7 (Alan Dodd, 77 Stanstead Rd., Hoddesdon, Herts., England: irreg.: 15c) and both are interesting. The former is a handsome and imposing folio, unpriced, featuring a miscellany of work by DEA, Robert Gilbert, Eddie Jones, William Rotsler, Larry S. Bourne, Juanita Coulson, Jean Linard, Brian Lumley, Bill Harry, John Miles, Dave English and Terry Jeeves. The latter is Dodd's usual competent job of fanzine-editing.

ALPHA (Jan Jansen, 229 Berchemlei, Borgerhout, Belgium: irreg: no price) has been absent too long, but in this latest issue the editor promises a renewal of publishing activity. The present effort features Linard, Bentcliffe, Mercer, Birchby, A. Vin Clarke, and a very funny article on photography by Dean Grennell. Actually, Grennell is writing about censorship, but his photographic memory makes for the real highlights here.

SFAIRA (Lars Helander, Lohegatan 11, Eskilstuna 3, Sweden: irreg: no price) has a long Soggy saga by Terry Jeeves and a bit of wisdom by Alan Dodd, plus bits by various Scandaknaves.

Letters

from the Readers

A-1, TOPS, ETC.

Dear Bill Hamling:

Chalk up one more great issue for *Madge*. THE SINISTER INVASION in the June issue was A-1, tops, etc. Sure hope to see more novels by Alexander Blade in the future.

Coming in a close second was SIX FRIGHTENED MEN—which fact doesn't surprise me. I've always thought of Randall Garrett as one of the best s-f writers in the business today. How's about one of his collaboration jobs with Bob Silverberg?

Third place in the issue I'd hand to WOMAN'S WORLD, by Silverberg. What a job it *could* have been if they'd gotten together on it.

Also enjoyed the article by Dr. Parkhouse. And am always glad to see Luther Scheffy's cartoons. All in all, a great issue.

David Rolfe
E3136 11th Ave.
Spokane, Wash.

Glad you liked Alex Blade's novel so well. Alex will be back shortly

with another humdinger. Good boy, that Alex! with

CAN'T FIND MADGE?

Dear Bill Hamling:

I have recently read the June issue of your good magazine. I thought it was better, actually, than some issues of F & SF!

Alexander Blade's novel, THE SINISTER INVASION, was very good, up to Mr. Blade's standards.

Trouble is, however, I can't get many issues of *Madge* in this area. How come?

Short stories for June were especially good, with Randall Garrett's SIX FRIGHTENED MEN on top. (Though what the crew of the rocket ship did to Donaldson wasn't humane at all. Don't those Exploratory Wing men have any feelings? —But, it was a very good story.)

I thought the end of THREE THIEVES OF JAPETUS was quite good, and WOMAN'S WORLD really fooled me.

FANDORA'S BOX was very amusing. Does Bob Bloch always

give a straight opinion?

The article by Dr. Parkhouse was interesting. Get more like it. He is right. Man is not ready for space flight.

In closing I'd like to let you know I'd rather read *Madge* than F & SF, INFINITY, AMAZING, and FANTASTIC. Just get your book on sale here!

Dennis Rejs
304 E. King St.
Malvern, Pa.

The distribution problem is being taken care of as you will have noted in this month's editorial. We would appreciate all of our readers letting us know if IMAGINATION and our companion s-f magazine, IMAGINATIVE TALES, are easier to find now. Thanks . . . wh

US MORONS . . .

Dear Mr. Hamling:

Of all the many science fiction mags I have read, your June issue is the lowest! It seems to be geared to the mentality of a high grade moron. Murder, fighting and sex are the principal features. There is not one thought-provoking tale in all the stories.

The only redeeming features are COSMIC PEN CLUB and FANDORA'S BOX. However, FANDORA'S BOX is heavy humored, and the style a little bit like MAD'S. But I suppose this is coincidental.

Miss Leslie Lynn
2944 W. Bryn Mawr
Chicago 45, Ill.

Had us worried there for a minute, Leslie. But all's forgiven as long as we're HIGH grade morons! How's it look down there with all those

other mags?

. wh

BEST NOVEL EVER

Dear Bill Hamling:

I just finished reading the June issue of *Madge* and I wanted to tell you how much I enjoyed it.

First off, I'd like to congratulate Alex Blade for his novel, THE SINISTER INVASION. It was the best feature novel I've ever read in an s-f magazine.

The short stories were good too, especially SIX FRIGHTENED MEN by Randall Garrett. His monster reminded me of the one in the movie, FORBIDDEN PLANET. As for the illos, I think they could be much better, in fact, they *should* be for a magazine of your high caliber.

Everything else was fine!

Robert Fox
155 Koster Row
Eggertsville, N.Y.

Thanks, Bob, and we hope the illos in this issue please you more . . . wh

PRETTY PUNK, HUH?

Dear Bill Hamling:

Do I read you right? You actually invite my comment on the June issue? And without any direct rebuttal of my opinion? Very well then, it gives me pleasure to tender this report.

The cover is pulpish, misleading, and irrelevant. But the lead story is far above your usual level. This isn't saying much, I realize, but at least there was some attempt at characterization, the good-guys-at-gun-point-scenes not so offensive, and the hero doesn't quite win single-handedly. The heroine stayed behind, and even that didn't offend me. The illo was, by default, the best in the

issue.

KILL ME IF YOU CAN! was trite. On page 66, at the sentence, "What was it he kept trying to remember?" I said to myself, aha! This guy is after the Autarch (how many autarch stories have I read so far?!) himself. SIX FRIGHTENED MEN: I looked at the illo and said, why that creature is *deliberately* trying to scare the man. Notice the classic pose: face in a grimace, arms (all four) upraised, with fingers spread clawlike . . . no thanks.

THE THREE THIEVES OF JAPETUS was all plot and no story. WOMAN'S WORLD was all action and no plot, about on a level with HARWOOD'S VORTEX. Silverberg is a hack.

The illos, with two exceptions (p. 6, p. 77) were terrible, drawn in careless haste. I know why you use color now—to cover up the sloppy drawings!

Cartoons, except the one on page 61, were good. Bloch's FANDORA'S BOX was funny.

Dainis Bisenieks
336 S. Warren
Saginaw, Mich.

So ok, we stand chastised. Rebuttal? None necessary, except to say we think MADGE is a lot better than you rate her. And most of our readers seem to agree. . . . wlh

FLYING SAUCER SUCKERS?

Dear Bill Hamling:

As you suggested in your editorial, the June issue of *Madge* was excellent. THE SINISTER INVASION was good despite its threatening title, and the weak romantic ending detracted from its otherwise

logical construction.

SIX FRIGHTENED MEN—now there was a masterpiece! Just a little more suspense and half your readers would have had heart attacks!

Despite Dainis Bisenieks's abhorrence for "chase scenes" KILL ME IF YOU CAN! was a much better than average s-f story. So what's wrong with chase scenes? Quite a number of well-recognized classics include them in their plots. Sure they can be misused, but so can any other literary device. Reinsberg's THREE THIEVES OF JAPETUS, all right, but a letdown from his novel in the February issue. WOMAN'S WORLD was out of place. It would have been below average in a comic book, let alone *Madge*. Then again, I never did like Silverberg anyway.

Referring to Roger Ebert's letter: short stories are not good literature? And *Madge* is not that good? I think I've probably read every s-f magazine in the country and I've yet to find a better one! (To prove it, here's my \$3 to extend my subscription 12 issues and get in on the new book offer!)

With regard to your June editorial, how come you're a "sucker" for flying saucers, Mr. Hamling?

Joseph B. J. Rice
75 E. Main St., Apt. 2
New Britain, Conn.

We're suckers for flying saucers because they're really science fiction, that's why. What else in this mixed-up world comes as close to being science fiction than a flying saucer? And, we might add, we believe they're extraterrestrial in origin. Until somebody can show us

they're figments, hallucinations, etc., we're not "suckers" in the sense of being duped, either. Flying Saucers, anyone? with

FLITTING MONSTER.

Dear Bill:

The June issue of *Madge* was the most readable of your magazine I've read so far.

Alex Blade, tried in vain on the "sense of wonder", but his THE

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SINISTER INVASION still turned out pretty good—even though the cover suggested a story more closely related to the title.

The one thing that doesn't get across to me in Randall Garrett's **SIX FRIGHTENED MEN** is why the monster showed up when Donaldson was not around with his thought projector on the scout trips.

The thing I always enjoy most is Bob Bloch's **FANDORA'S BOX**. That's why I'm subscribing.

Ted Christakes
 4413 W. 127th St.
 Blue Island, Ill.

That's a good enough reason to subscribe! . . . Maybe that monster was just plain onery, showing up when he shouldn't! wth

ANNOUNCING OKLAÇON V

Dear Madge Readers:

We would like to fake this opportunity to invite you to the Fifth

Annual Oklahoma Science Fiction Convention, August '31, September 1st & 2nd at the Youngblood Hotel in Enid, 'Okla.

The Oklacon V is distinctive for many reasons. First, it coincides with the 50th birthday of the State of Oklahoma, and would be ideal for a summer vacation.

Second, the Oklacon is the only major US s-f gathering this year, what with the Worldcon being held in London over Labor Day. This will allow US fans to attend an s-f gathering if they cannot make it to England.

Please send us your name, and that of any fan in your area. We want a BIG attendance this year, and can guarantee a lot of fun for all. Convention dues, \$1.

Walt Bowart
 Kent Corey
OKLAÇON V
 P. O. Box 64
 Enid, Okla.

Good luck, boys. Hope many fans will attend the Oklacon. Send in your name, gang wth

AMAZING BOOK BONUS OFFER!

Dear Bill Hamling:

When I received the June issue of *Madge* I was positive it was going to be a lousy issue. When you said you were suckers for flying saucers you meant it! Man, were you a sucker for buying that cover! I don't think you have to be so sensational . . .

However, after starting reading **THE SINISTER INVASION** I wasn't so sure about my first evaluation of the issue. I do feel the ending could have been more skill-

fully handled.

My opinion really changed when I read **KILL ME IF YOU CAN!** A well-thought-out plot and well written. Then with that choice Garrett yarn, **SIX FRIGHTENED MEN**, I finally decided a subscription to *Madge* was worthwhile.

Speaking of subscribing, I am amazed at the tremendous book bonus you offer. I don't see how you do it. And among others you offer a great book like **EMPIRE OF THE ATOM**. For the lowest price in the business, yet—free!

William M. Noe II

1204 Milan Ave.

South Pasadena, Cal.

Glad your opinion of the issue changed, Bill. As to the book-sub-

scription offer (turn page) we agree—it's quite a deal. How we do it is a secret, but why we do it, that's easy. We want every reader of **IMAGINATION** to be a subscriber, getting each and every issue. To accomplish this we make the very unusual free book offer—and every one of the books, as you know, is a top-notch item necessary for every s-f library. So, turn the page, gang and dig up your three, six, or nine bux. You're getting the deal of your s-f life! Which closes up shop for this month. Once again, welcome into the fold for all you new readers who've just discovered **MADGE**. Hope you'll feel it's the best "find" you've yet experienced in science fiction. See you next issue . . . with

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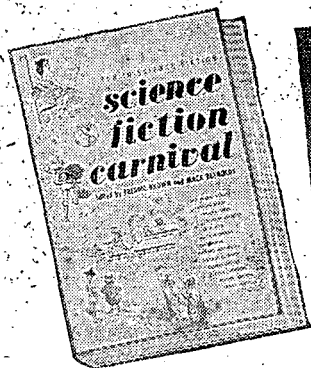
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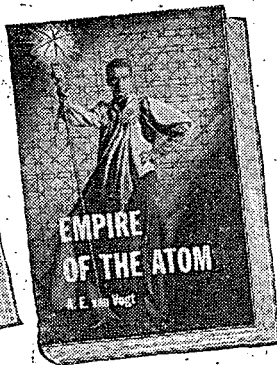
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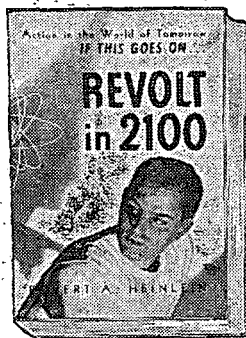
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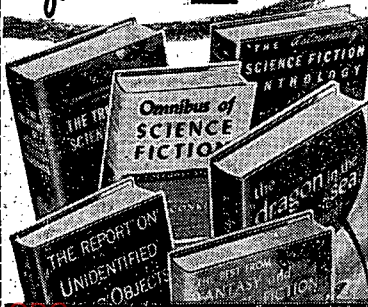
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